

CHANGING INTERPRETATIONS:
THE HOMES OF TENNESSEE'S PRESIDENTS AND THE ISSUE OF SLAVERY

by
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ABSTRACT

Historic sites in the Southeast region of the United States have long struggled with slavery, a topic that is often ignored or marginalized in site interpretation. At a time when more and more sites are looking toward long-term sustainability and building audiences, this issue is pertinent. This thesis discusses how Tennessee's three presidential sites handled the issue of slavery in the past, how they handle it currently, and how it could be improved. All three either have at one point struggled or continue to struggle with the issue of slavery, like so many other historic house museums in the Southeast. It also details the importance of the inclusion of this story in site interpretation at the three homes in question as evidenced by the opinions of visitors to the sites and the opinions of historians who have studied these three sites and other eighteenth and nineteenth century presidential sites.

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of how historic sites interpret the issue of slavery is not a new one, but it is still a hot topic, especially in the South where heritage organizations increasingly strive to expand their audiences. Historic sites in this region of the country have long struggled with slavery, a topic that is often ignored or marginalized in site interpretation. Historic house museums, especially in the South, are the last bastions of and outdated interpretive approach to the presentation of slavery. This is true of Tennessee's presidential sites as well. The state was home to three United States presidents, all of whom lived during the nineteenth century and owned men and women as enslaved workers. Their respective sites differ in many ways, including how they tell the story of slavery. All three either have at one point struggled or continue to grapple with the issue of slavery in relation to the man whose memory and legacy they are trying to perpetuate.

As presidential sites, the people who originally created these museums did so in order to celebrate and glorify these men, so discussing the unsavory aspects of their histories was not something that many sites did or still want to do. The men whose sites are in question here are Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk, and Andrew Johnson—all very different presidents with very different homes, but they all participated in the institution of slavery. This thesis will explore how these sites handled the issue of slavery in the past, how they handle it currently, and how it could be improved. It will also detail the importance of the inclusion of this story in their site interpretations as evidenced by the opinions of visitors to the sites as well as the viewpoints of historians about these three sites and other eighteenth and nineteenth century presidential sites.

“Human beings participate in history both as actors and as narrators.”¹ So wrote Michel-Rolph Trouillot, the author of a very influential work among public historians, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. This book tells the story of how and why certain aspects of history get left out of the traditional historical narrative. According to Trouillot, silences enter the historical narrative at four points—when the event occurs, when the event is documented, when the event is written about, and when the event is given “retrospective significance” (made into history).² However, memory can often bring out the other narratives—the ones that historians silenced for so long. Memory is often recorded through oral histories, by narrators who were once the actors in the past. Using oral history is one way that many historic sites bring out their untold stories. The inclusion of these stories tell the people who experienced them and their descendants that their story matters and that it is worth the time and the effort to tell it. These stories, particularly in regards to the stories of slavery and African Americans, help to bridge racial gaps that still exist today.³

Oral histories in this thesis reveal the public’s perception some perspectives from public audiences of how the three presidential sites in Tennessee discuss the topic of slavery. This gives an important look at why it is important to discuss this topic at historic sites. Historians know that oral histories can provide a perspective into a subject

¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 26.

³ June Manning Thomas, “Racial Inequality and Empowerment: Necessary Theoretical Constructs for Understanding U.S. Planning History,” in *Making the Invisible Visible: A Multicultural Planning History*, edited by Leonie Sandercock (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 198-206.

that traditional documentation cannot, as demonstrated by the work of Alessandro Portelli. Oral history tells historians and the public what people thought they did, what it meant at the time, and what it means now.⁴ It provides deeper insight, and that may be exactly what historic house museums need in regards to the stories of African Americans at their sites. Paula Hamilton points out that oral historians can serve as “the mediator between generations,” which is so true and so important to the field of history and to historic house museums in particular.⁵ Oral history links the past to the present in a very understandable and human way. In the words of Antoinette T. Jackson, “Recovering knowledge from families and communities that have often been underrepresented in the public record yet remain central to understanding a larger more comprehensive American story is a collective charter.”⁶ Adding to this knowledge is a key goal of this thesis.

Discussing the African American story and some of the issues associated with slavery can be painful for many people, especially those of African descent. One exhibit that created a lot of tension within the black community in Washington, D.C., especially among the black employees at the Library of Congress, was “Back of The Big House: The Cultural Landscape of the Plantation” in 1995. It stands as an example of how historic organizations should reach out to the community and understand their feelings and historical memories on a subject before going forward with a project that includes their history. It also highlights why current events are so important to understanding the

⁴ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991).

⁵ Paula Hamilton, “The Oral Historian as Memorist,” *The Oral History Review* 32, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2005): 11-18.

⁶ Antoinette T. Jackson, *Speaking for the Enslaved: Heritage Interpretation at Antebellum Plantation Sites* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2012), 32.

impact of any given interpretation, whether it be at a historic site or in a traveling exhibit. This exhibit was located in the Library of Congress and contained rare photos of slavery and plantation life. Some of the African American employees at the library found the exhibit, its images, and its captions that were written in broken dialect that many found to be offensive or disturbing. Some had a hard time distinguishing between the historical presentation of slavery and the celebration of it.⁷ When asked about this issue in an interview, historian Eric Foner commented that he understood why the black employees at the Library of Congress were upset over the exhibit. “Presenting African Americans only as slaves, the argument went, reinforced stereotypes of them being slavish,” he said.⁸

It is important to remember that African Americans have more to their history than slavery, and sometimes other factors play into why an exhibition or a certain kind of interpretation does not fare well. Horton points out that the employees who opposed the exhibit related the memory of slavery to their employment at the Library of Congress because of a long-term labor dispute with the library over job discrimination. The exhibit came down three hours after it went up. It then moved to a public library in D.C., where it attracted a large African American crowd and enjoyed success. Though it did better at a different location, it is obvious that a lack of communication with the people who would be seeing this exhibit on a daily basis led to it being such a controversial issue. Once the

⁷ Hermina Glass-Avery, “Assessing African American Attitudes Toward the Civil War,” Final Focus Group Report, Kennesaw State University and the National Park Service, Kennesaw, GA, 2011: 14 http://www.clevelandcivilwarroundtable.com/articles/comment/Civil_War_African-American_Attitudes.pdf.

⁸ Leah Arroyo, “The Historian in the Museum: An Interview with Eric Foner,” *Museum News* (1996): http://www.guillinmerrell.com/pdfs/mn_arroyo.pdf (accessed November 2012).

exhibitors explained the intention of this exhibit and they provided some contextual information, the exhibit attracted a large and engaged audience. Historians agree that this is a topic that needs to be discussed more freely and interpreted with more sensitivity.⁹ Enhancing the interpretation of slavery and of the African Americans subjected to it means knowing and communicating with the audience and presenting the story as a complex and thoughtful manner. .

When historic sites cannot overcome the problems with interpreting the African American story, they often fall into certain categories as defined by Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small. They argue in their book *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* that plantation museums in the South operate as they do and treat the African American story as they do because of “collective identification, white guilt, and avoidance—and, in some cases, anti-Black hostility.”¹⁰ They have divided the representations of slavery at historic sites across the South into “symbolic annihilation,” “trivialization and deflection,” “segregation and the marginalization of knowledge,” and “relative incorporation.”¹¹ Eichstedt and Small developed these terms after visiting several plantation museums in Virginia, Georgia, and Louisiana, and these are the terms used in this thesis to describe the kinds of interpretation at Tennessee’s presidential sites.

⁹ Ibid.; Horton, James Oliver Horton, “Presenting Slavery: The Perils of Telling America’s Racial Story,” *The Public Historian* 21, no. 4 (1999): 19-24.

¹⁰ Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), 15.

¹¹ Ibid., 22.

At sites that “symbolically annihilate” the African American story, the focus usually lies with the life of white elites within the plantation lifestyle. Often, there is no mention at all of slavery, the enslaved people who lived there, or African Americans in general, and when they are mentioned, it is usually in such a way that it can be easily glossed over or ignored. Euphemisms come into play when mentioning slavery, calling it “employment” instead of “enslavement,” and referring to the enslaved as simply “servants” or “workers.” On guided tours, docents often use the passive voice to discuss the work of enslaved people. Saying “the house was built,” “the food was cooked,” or “the fields were tended” takes away the necessity of assigning a subject to the action. Also at these sites, Eichstedt and Small observed that often tour guides gave universalizing and “ahistorical” statements that painted an untrue picture. At many sites, they observed that their guides would say “everyone was welcome here,” which of course was not truthful at all. When suppressing the memory of slavery like this at sites, the interpretation then focuses on the narratives of the white people who lived there. The sites portray them as hospitable and generous people who were moral and democratic leaders, ignoring and smothering the issue that is so glaringly present.¹²

Sites that trivialize and deflect the story of slavery do mention the institution, but they do so in ways that minimize its significance. Eichstedt and Small say that this is often done through humor or mockery, and this demeans the memory of what African Americans had to endure. There are two categories involved in trivializing and deflecting, and the first involves explicit discussion of African Americans and the institution of slavery. Often, docents portray slavery as a benevolent institution. They claim that

¹² Ibid., 105-146.

enslaved people were better off economically, psychologically, and/or morally being owned by whites and living on plantations than they would have been on their own. Guides will often point out that the enslaved were in a better position than the poor whites in the South, often directing attention to the narrative of the happy or grateful slave at these sites. Stories of specific enslaved men, women, or children receiving rewards and favors from their master and then expressing contentment with their status dominate this kind of narrative. It is a harmful method of discussing slavery in that it perpetuates the stereotype that African Americans are not capable of controlling their own lives. It also ignores the other aspects of slavery that included brutal and dehumanizing treatment. This portrayal often goes on further and tells of the enslaved who remained loyal to their owners after emancipation.

On the opposite side of this narrative is the story of the untrustworthy slave. Owners had methods of ensuring that their enslaved workers did not cheat them out of work, including the “whistle walk” where enslaved women most often had to whistle while they brought food into the house to prove that they were not eating anything that was intended for the white people on the way. The second category involved in trivializing and deflecting the African American story focuses on the white community. This most often entails stories of the “good owner” who would grant certain reprieves for his or her slaves. It also involves the portrayal of whites as hard workers who often had more difficult tasks to fulfill than those who they enslaved. A common tendency in

current years among docents is to equate themselves to slaves as well, and this only minimizes the significance and difficulty of slavery even more.¹³

Sometimes sites do incorporate the African American story into the interpretation, but often they segregate and marginalize this information. This is done through specific “slave life” tours or separate areas of the site that focus exclusively on the African American story. “While a step in the right direction, in that slavery is actually discussed, sites that follow the segregation-of-knowledge strategy don’t necessarily increase the likelihood that visitors will learn about slavery, since visitors self-select to attend the special tours,” according to Eichstedt and Small.¹⁴ They argue that “whiteness” is still untouched by slavery at these sites because it is discussed in a completely different context on a different tour that most likely takes place at a different area of the site. The authors observed that white audiences most often went with the white-centric tours offered at these sites, but that they were more likely to go on the separate tour if a guide led them on it. This kind of interpretation tries to create a more balanced history at these sites, and it is definitely a step in the right direction. It is just not quite where it should be yet. The authors argue that “while these sites do break a bit with the racialized regime of representation that erases African Americans, they still do not fundamentally challenge the positioning of African Americans and despicable white behaviors as outside the norm of knowledge and history.”¹⁵ They are ever so close to getting it right, and they need to shift their focus to a more inclusive interpretation on the regular tours.

¹³ Ibid., 147-169.

¹⁴ Ibid., 170-171.

¹⁵ Ibid., 202.

Some sites that Eichstedt and Small visited had interpretations that moved towards the relative incorporation of the African American story. These sites met certain criteria that included a tour that provided visitors with information on how slavery existed at that site that was not fleeting or degrading. They had researched and presented information on the enslaved people at the site, demonstrating that they thought the story was worthy and necessary as well. In addition, these sites acknowledged that the wealth of the white people who lived at the site depended on the subjugation of the black people who lived and forcibly worked there. Lastly, these sites also created a more complex definition of the slave owner and the family so that the fact that they owned African Americans was part of it. The portrayal of the elite whites was no longer purely romantic but was realistic. Some sites they visited were still in an in-between phase of fully incorporating the story of the black community and sometimes reverted to trivialization or marginalization. The sites that do engage in relative incorporation that the authors observed still have a long road ahead of them when it comes to being fully balanced, but these sites are taking steps in the right direction.¹⁶

The findings that Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small came across in their book are common to very many historic sites, and other historians concur with these sorts of conclusions. James Oliver Horton discussed in his article, "Presenting Slavery: The Perils of Telling America's Racial Story," how it is the duty of the public historian to go out and create a discourse on the issue of slavery with the American public. This proves to be very difficult with the idea of white supremacy still reigning in textbooks and in the

¹⁶ Ibid., 203-230.

interpretation at historic sites across the nation.¹⁷ This is especially evident at plantation museums, as Eichstedt and Small discussed. Another point that Horton addresses and that is very important to remember is that different audiences have different expectations when visiting historic sites, and this links back to the idea of white supremacy in many cases. He observed that white visitors wanted to see masters portrayed as “good masters” and that black visitors wanted docents to discuss the horrors of slavery and what the African Americans had to endure. Both groups of people expected African American guides to discuss race issues more than white guides, which is an interesting yet unsurprising finding. Since African Americans were the ones who had to suffer from the injustice of slavery, they are the ones who are expected to discuss it more frequently and more in-depth on tours. That is something that needs to change, however, because guides of any color should have to discuss all aspects of history equally at any historic site.¹⁸ Race is a sensitive issue, and historic institutions need to learn how to deal with it in respectful ways that involve community input.

However, change can be hard, especially when it involves learning new material to present to the public. Training presents a very large problem in particular in regards to this particular issue, and as a museum professional who worked at a historic house in Louisiana told me in an email about trying to get docents to include a discussion of slavery on their tours, it can be very difficult to get docents to change their mindsets and their tours. Also, an issue that she came across was that her docents (who were all white females, aged 60 to 80) thought that visitors would assume they were descended from

¹⁷ “Presenting Slavery,” 29-30.

¹⁸ Ibid., 28-29.

slave owners and hold them accountable for what happened to the African Americans. They thus thought discussing the subject would bring up questions that they were not comfortable answering.¹⁹ This repetitive from the Hermitage chapter—maybe placed this stuff in the intro? However, these issues are not acceptable reasons to leave out the African American story. Senior staff should train docents how to deal with situations where questions on race arise, and all docents should be well read about the subject so as to provide detailed and factual information.

In order to reach African Americans, historic institutions need to reach out to their communities and provide them with the factors that matter most to them. Putting the time and effort into focusing on why this group of people does not attend museums and how it can be remedied is beneficial for museums in tangible and intangible ways. They know that they can reach people who need to be represented properly, but historically have not been, while also increasing their attendance and membership rates. Historic institutions need to focus on being culturally relevant and on creating a welcoming presence for all minority groups.²⁰ This is something that affects all of the historic sites in Tennessee that are discussed in this work. Properly incorporating the African American story is something that they should all take seriously, and some of them are well on their way to doing that while others are far behind. Relationships with the community are absolutely necessary to bringing in a more diverse audience. If historic institutions can properly

¹⁹ Adrienne Berney, email message to author, February 10, 2012.

²⁰ Cecilia Garibay, “Responsive and Accessible: How Museums are Using Research to Better Engage Diverse Cultural Communities,” *Association of Science Technology Centers Dimensions* (January/February 2011) <http://www.astc.org/blog/2011/02/28/responsive-and-accessible-how-museums-are-using-research-to-better-engage-diverse-cultural-communities/> (accessed April 4, 2012).

execute their interpretation and create a dialogue between the white community and the black community, this will help to develop better racial understanding. Historic organizations must reach out to their communities and incorporate the memories of the stories of all people who have a story to be told at the sites.

Some audiences today still expect the historic institutions in Tennessee to paint a romantic picture of the South. If sites want to appeal to a broader audience, and if they want to meet the standards of excellence for modern museums, they have to tell an inclusive story. In the words of an African American culinary historian and living history interpreter in South Carolina:

You go to plantation museums and enslaved Blacks are not even talked about, but called servants. We are invisible. Visitors come from all over to marvel at the architecture and wallpaper and windowpanes but forget the fact that many of those houses were built by enslaved African Americans or that the food that those plantations were renowned for came from Black men and Black women truly slaving away in the detached kitchens. Imagine how I, a culinary historian and living history interpreter feel during some of these tours where my ancestors are literally annihilated and whisked away to the corners of those rooms, dying multiple deaths of anonymity and cultural amnesia.²¹

His perspective shows that this issue is still very relevant. This problem is obvious, and it is pervasive in very many historic institutions. For him to feel like his history is being discussed properly, museums and historic houses need to work hard at it.

Overall, one can see that interpreting the African American story is the professional and ethical duty, and should be the desire, of historic house museums. They are the stewards of the community's memory and thus its very identity. They must reconcile the perceived past and the true past in many southern cities, including

²¹ Michael Twitty, "An Open Letter to Paula Deen," Afroculinaria.com <http://afroculinaria.com/2013/06/25/an-open-letter-to-paula-deen/> (accessed June 25, 2013).

Nashville, Columbia, and Greeneville, Tennessee, and that takes much time, effort, and community outreach to get an accurate and sensitive representation across to the public.²²

These museums thus have a very big task and responsibility to the public, and they need to take it very seriously. The historic institutions that make a conscious effort to thoughtfully incorporate the history of African Americans can create a helpful and healing discourse between museum audiences of any race, and they can also market themselves to a wider audience much more easily. Another impetus for improving the interpretation of the African American experience at these sites is the evolving historiography on slavery over the last generation or so. Since the 1960s, historians have made much progress in finding unique ways to research and interpret the slavery experience, and the sites in question here and other sites across the South could benefit greatly from the work of public historians who have focused on this topic over the years.²³

The Hermitage, the Ancestral Home of James K. Polk, and the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site all have different ways of interpreting or not interpreting the history of African Americans. Some are better than others and all can use improvement.

²² Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, eds., *Memory, History, Nation: Contested Pasts* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006).

²³ Refer to these works: James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, eds., *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* (New York and London: The New Press, 2006); James Oliver Horton, "Presenting Slavery: The Perils of Telling America's Racial Story." *The Public Historian* 21, no. 4 (1999): 19-38; Winthrop D. Jordan, *The White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Eugene Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (New York: Parthenon Books, 1969); Eugene Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Fatal Self-Deception: Slaveholding Paternalism in the Old South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

There can be progress towards reconciling Tennessee's long and often violent racial past if historic organizations and communities work towards it. It is a goal of this thesis to help historic sites recognize the strong need to incorporate the story of the African Americans at their site and why it is so important to do so. In the words of African American minister Fred Shuttlesworth, "If you don't tell it like it was, it can never be as it ought to be."²⁴

²⁴ David W. Blight, "If You Don't Tell It Like It Was, It Can Never Be as It Ought to Be," in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, eds. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (New York and London: The New Press, 2006), 33.

CHAPTER I

Andrew Jackson, The Hermitage, and Slavery

Andrew Jackson is one of the most controversial historical figures in United States history due to his status as a hero and a villain all at once. This is due, in part, to his dealings with the institution of slavery both politically and personally. This chapter covers the history of Andrew Jackson and slavery, how The Hermitage, his home in Nashville, Tennessee, has handled the issue over the years, how it handles it currently, and how it does and does not do it well.



Figure 1: The Hermitage, Home of President Andrew Jackson, Photo by Lauren Baud

The Ladies' Hermitage Association (LHA), organized in 1888 to commemorate President Andrew Jackson, originally defined the mission of their organization as one "to preserve, beautify and adorn [The Hermitage], throughout all coming years, in a manner

most befitting of that great man and commensurate with the gratitude of his countrymen.”¹ This statement shows a very persistent trend among historic house museums in the U.S. South —perpetuating the idea of the “great man” who owned and ran the plantation with the help of “servants.” In 1965, the LHA’s guidebook boasted that “the house reflects the qualities of the man who built it, cultivated its fields, and planted its trees.”² It did not mention the large community of enslaved men and women who were the ones who actually built the Hermitage, cultivated its fields, and planted its trees. They, not Andrew Jackson, were the ones behind the success of The Hermitage as a plantation, yet The Hermitage as a historic site has, until recently, neglected and marginalized the plantation’s enslaved people.

Archaeologists have done extensive research on the slave quarters at The Hermitage over the years and have found very rare artifacts that allow visitors to see what life was like for the enslaved there.³ The fist charms, beads, types of animal bones, and toys found in the areas where Jackson’s enslaved men, women, and children lived and worked give insight into their spiritual practices, their diets, and what they did for leisure. The research has also shown the differences between the enslaved men and women in the fields and those who worked in the house with the family, mostly in regards to the nature of their work. The Hermitage does a very good job of telling the story of those who worked in the fields, but sometimes the story of the men and women who worked in the

¹ Ladies’ Hermitage Association., “Ladies’ Hermitage Association Guidebook,” 1901, Administrative Collection, The Hermitage, Nashville, TN.

² Ladies’ Hermitage Association., “Ladies’ Hermitage Association Guidebook,” 1965, Administrative Collection, The Hermitage, Nashville, TN.

³ Brian W. Thomas, “Power and Community: The Archaeology of Slavery at the Hermitage Plantation,” *American Antiquity* 63, no. 4 (1998): 531-551.

house is lacking depending on the tour and tour guide. Using more of the archaeological research from the sites near the house would help with telling the story of the house slaves at The Hermitage.



Figure 2: The layout for the field slave quarters as evidenced through archaeological research at The Hermitage, photo by Lauren Baud.

The staff of The Hermitage has gradually accumulated knowledge through varied research about the lives of the enslaved at the site through archaeological digs and genealogical research, but the story has not always been told to its full potential. The Hermitage has gone through several of the stages of slavery interpretation outlined by Eichstedt and Small in *Representations of Slavery*.⁴ When it first became a museum in 1889, the word “slavery” did not ever come up in the guidebooks even though one of Andrew Jackson’s formerly enslaved workers still lived on the site and gave tours to visitors. His name was Alfred Jackson, described often in the first Hermitage guidebooks

⁴ Eichstedt and Small, 14-20.

as “the old faithful servant.”⁵ He was born on the property in 1803 and died there in 1901.

The staff at the site claim that Alfred continued to live at The Hermitage to show his deep loyalty and admiration of Andrew Jackson. Myers Brown points out that other reasons Alfred stayed there could have been “his lack of education, financial resources[,] or that he was physically unable to move from the land.”⁶ In addition, he may have enjoyed the level of fame and recognition he received at The Hermitage. After the house became a museum, the Ladies’ Hermitage Association took care of Alfred’s needs in return for his work at the site, which made it seem like he was still a house servant. The various considerations for his staying at the site other than loyalty to Jackson are rarely if ever discussed. Alfred is a major part of the interpretation at the site with his cabin and his grave being major points of interest for the visitors and major talking points, so giving the reason that Alfred was simply a loyal servant serves to paint the picture that Jackson was a benevolent master. For many visitors, Alfred’s cabin and story is the only reference point to slavery on the site because many of them cannot make it to the archaeological sites on the grounds for a variety of reasons (fatigue, disability, time constraints, etc.).

⁵ Ladies’ Hermitage Association., “Ladies’ Hermitage Association Guidebooks,” 1889-1949, Administrative Collection, The Hermitage, Nashville, TN.

⁶ Myers Brown, “The Interpretation of Middle Tennessee Slave Life, 1830-1860,” (Master’s thesis, Middle Tennessee State University, 2000), 66.



Figure 3: Alfred's Cabin at The Hermitage, Photo by Lauren Baud.

Handling the issue of slavery was not very easy for the people who lived at The Hermitage in the nineteenth century and for those who worked there in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Jackson had expansive slaveholdings, owning over one hundred fifty African American men, women, and children. His main source of income came from his slaveholdings, and he held no qualms about his position as a slaveholder. His slaves worked in the house and in the fields, but there was a major division between the two types of work according to Myers Brown in his master's thesis written in 2000.⁷

While Jackson may not have been a particularly violent or abusive slaveholder, portraying slavery in this way through Alfred downplays the fact that Jackson was a proponent of this institution that cost the lives, health, and dignity of so many African Americans. This kind of interpretation also downplays the instances in which he did

⁷ Brown, 64-67.

condone violence towards his slaves, such as when they ran away. The Hermitage also does not discuss that fact that many of Jackson's slaves still living with his family at The Hermitage left the plantation when the Union army occupied Nashville in 1862, including some of the most "loyal," including Hannah and her daughter Martha who worked in the mansion.⁸ However, even with those instances factored into the situation, The Hermitage is still very much ahead of many other sites in Tennessee in regards to slavery interpretation, including the other two presidential sites in the state.

Since The Ladies' Hermitage Association began docent-led tours in the late 1960s, the site's interpretation of slavery has undergone a number of changes. . Gradually, the site has been trying to move toward a more inclusive interpretation. In 2000, Myers Brown wrote that the visitor first got an introduction to slavery at the site in the museum through archaeological artifacts and other objects used by the enslaved people on the plantation. The visitor then moved on to the audio tour part of their visit. This audio featured the voices of different characters on the plantation, including the overseer and some of the enslaved men and women. However, the audio tour did not go into the complexity of the institution. At that time, Alfred's cabin only had "the minimal of interpretation" with a brief explanation on a sign.⁹ In the twelve years since Brown's analysis, The Hermitage has expanded its interpretation of slavery..

In an effort to have a broader and more inclusive interpretation on many issues, including slavery, the staff of The Hermitage made a conscious effort over the past

⁸ Ladies' Hermitage Association, "Slavery." <http://www.thehermitage.com/mansion-grounds/farm/slavery> (accessed November 15, 2012).

⁹ Brown, 64-66.

decade to foster change. The site has engaged in archaeological programs to help visitors understand and talk about slavery in a setting that makes it more comfortable for them, and they regularly hold special events and programs to memorialize those who worked for Jackson and upon whom he built his fortune. Funded by an NEH grant in 2004, The Hermitage began the implementation phase of their new overall interpretation theme, ““The Hermitage, Andrew Jackson, and a Changing America.” The six specific themes that were included under this plan were (and are) as follows: Growing Democracy, Cotton Economy and Slavery, Westward Expansion and American Indians, Reform and Religion, Women’s Lives in a Changing America, and Developing a Distinct American Culture. The professional staff wanted to make sure that visitors left with four “big ideas” in mind: “The Hermitage offers a unique example of life in the Jacksonian Era;” “the Jacksonian Era was critical to the development of our nation;” “History is a dynamic process of inquiry;” and “through active participation in the political process, people can effect change.”¹⁰ They developed these goals and set out for visitors to come out with those perspectives after conducting a survey of visitor expectations and overall opinions of their trip to The Hermitage.¹¹

Based on visitor opinions and a research trip that twelve senior staff took in 1999 to Monticello, Mt. Vernon, and Colonial Williamsburg to learn various ways of interpreting slavery, the executive staff and board of directors of The Hermitage decided

¹⁰ National Endowment for the Humanities Implementation Grant Proposal, 2004, Ladies’ Hermitage Association, Administrative Collection, The Hermitage, Nashville, TN.

¹¹ Marsha Mullin, “Andrew Jackson’s America: New Stories for an Old Historic Site,” AASLH Conference Presentation, 2009, Ladies’ Hermitage Association, Administrative Collection, The Hermitage, Nashville, TN.

to incorporate the following into their reinterpretation: a new fifteen minute introductory video, a new tour of the Hermitage mansion incorporating the outlined themes, two new and four revised interpreter-led walking tours of the grounds, sixteen new wayside exhibits, an addition of reproduction interpretive objects in the mansion to invoke the presence of enslaved people, a refurnishing of Alfred's cabin, a panel exhibition at The First Hermitage, a new on-site brochure and map, new costumed third person interpreters extending live interpretation outside the mansion, and a new interpreter training program emphasizing content, technique, and sensitive subjects. On the aspect of enhancing the interpretation of slavery, the staff wrote the following in a grant proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities:

The social and cultural milieu of enslaved African-Americans is a crucial part of The Hermitage story, substantiated by on-site archaeological evidence and the documentary evidence about the lives and activities of many of the enslaved that lived here. The Hermitage also illustrates the expansion of the institution of slavery in response to increased demand for cotton by telling the story of The Hermitage's transformation from a frontier farm to an established industrialized plantation. Industrialization, transportation, and communications changes – mechanized cotton mills, the opening of the Erie Canal, steamboat commerce, and the expanding network of railroads – increased the demand for cotton and facilitated market development. The cotton story is one in which owners, slaves, poor whites (including overseers), and tenant farmers all played important roles. In our interpretation at the Hermitage, we have opportunities to present various pieces of these stories in the Hermitage mansion, the garden, Alfred's cabin, the work areas, the First Hermitage, and the field quarters, as well as the introductory film and exhibits.¹²

Through the changes that The Hermitage made to their interpretation imbedded in this NEH grant, the story the site tells comes closer to the one described in their proposal.

¹² National Endowment for the Humanities Implementation Grant Proposal, 2004.

Today when on a tour of The Hermitage, visitors get to see and hear very much about the enslaved community at the site. The first part of the tour is held in the visitor center. Visitors start out with the introductory video that speaks of Jackson being a slave owner, but the interpretation of Jackson's democracy (aimed at helping white men) as one that minorities could later use to fight for their own personal liberties in the video is somewhat off-putting. This interpretation seems a little presumptuous and should probably be omitted in the future. For someone who fought so hard to suppress the rights of minorities, to say that his kind of government provided a path for them to acquire rights could be seen as offensive to visitors from various ethnic backgrounds. After the video, visitors can choose to look through the museum area in the visitor center, which still houses many of the slave artifacts discussed by Myers Brown. The main hallway in the visitor center also has an extended exhibit featuring the stories of eight enslaved men and women under Jackson. The language on these panels is up for interpretation to the visitor—some may see it as inclusive while others may see it as defensive.

When visitors move toward the mansion, they have the choice of listening to an audio tour that is provided with the price of admission (\$19.00 per adult as of the summer of 2012) for the standard tour. The audio tour provides a lot more information about the African Americans, as one walks around to the various structures at the site to find the corresponding number for the slave quarters, the kitchen building, or any other place on site that a visitor might be able to learn about the African American story. On the guided tour through the house itself, there is very little mention of slavery and no serious discussion of it, even though, according to the docent training guide, at least four enslaved men and women are supposed to be mentioned by the docents in different areas

of the mansion. The guided tour of the home should provide more information on enslaved people who worked in the house because most of the emphasis on slavery at the site is currently on the field slaves, the story of which the wayside exhibits and audio tour do a great job of telling. The executive staff of The Hermitage could remedy this problem by engaging in more direct oversight of the docents.

Unfortunately, sometimes The Hermitage still engages in what Eichstedt and Small call “segregation of knowledge” in its slavery interpretation. The site offers a separate wagon tour at an extra fee (\$11.00 per adult as of the summer of 2012) during the warmer months of the year that is purely about the African Americans at the site. In the words of Marsha Mullin, the Vice President of Museum Services and Chief Curator at the site:

We realized that in the height of summer, the walk to the distant field slave- quarter area was not appealing, so we contracted to have horse-drawn wagon tours carry visitors out there. The driver also provides the interpretation. This extra fee half-hour tour has proven very popular, and while we suspect that most people take it for the novelty of the wagon ride, they receive the interpretive message anyway.¹³

Those are valid points, but having this separate tour can create a problem for telling a complete story because very few visitors will want to pay more for an additional tour that does not cover the whole story of the site. However, the content on the wagon tour can provide a good deal of information about the lives of the enslaved at The Hermitage for those who take the time and the money to go on it. The guides sometimes also try to portray Jackson as a benevolent slaveholder on that tour as well though, saying, “He treated his slaves like he treated the men under him in the military.” This is an interesting

¹³ Marsha Mullin, “Telling the Story of Slavery at The Hermitage: Archaeology as an Interpretive Tool” American Alliance of Museums Conference Presentation, 2007, Ladies’ Hermitage Association, Administrative Collection, The Hermitage, Nashville, TN.

comparison given that Jackson executed some of the men under him during his military career. Nonetheless, Jackson did not buy and sell the military men under his command, nor did he buy and sell their children. While it is not perfect, the interpretation at The Hermitage is vastly more effective than that at many other southern historic sites, including the Ancestral Home of James K. Polk and the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site.

Since making significant changes to the interpretation, the staff of The Hermitage has a definite opinion on how slavery is interpreted at the site. The Hermitage has a staff of over seventy people, and there are twenty-eight paid interpreters. Out of twelve staff members ranging from tour guides to public relations specialists to executive staff who answered a survey in July and August 2012 about slavery interpretation at the site, eleven of them were satisfied with the way The Hermitage interprets race and slavery. All of those who answered this survey identified themselves as white or of mixed European descent, which is representative of the majority of the entire staff at The Hermitage. The one staff member who did not feel that the interpretation was entirely sound on the issue of race noted that while The Hermitage does a good job of interpreting slavery, it needs to do more on telling the story of Native Americans and the Trail of Tears.¹⁴ One person surveyed has worked at The Hermitage for thirty-three years, and she commented on her survey, “When I first started working at the Hermitage in May of 1979 slavery was hardly mentioned unless one of the guests asked a question about it. Today it is part of

¹⁴ Lauren Baud, Slavery Interpretation at the Hermitage Staff Survey, July- August 2012. Staff members filled out this survey anonymously online through SurveyMonkey.com.

our interpretation.”¹⁵ It is important to remember that even though The Hermitage has improvements to make, it has definitely made significant improvements over the years.

This site, being such a mecca for many southern history buffs because of Jackson’s popularity and his mythical memory, has a great opportunity to spread the knowledge of slavery and of the African Americans who were at that site. The Ladies’ Hermitage Association engaged in “symbolic annihilation” of the slavery story for many decades, but over time (more recently) the staff there gradually worked parts of the story into the interpretation. When The Hermitage first opened as a museum, visitors walked through the mansion with a guidebook, but no docents or other kinds of information. The Ladies’ Hermitage Association used the outbuildings as extra museum space and as places to sell souvenirs and have picnics. The guidebook evolved over the years, and by the 1960s and 1970s, the interpretation of the outbuildings was more developed in that they were actually used for interpreting the kind of work done on the site instead of being used as souvenir shops, and the guidebook itself mentioned slavery. At that point, the issue of slavery was best defined as being “trivialized” because any reference to slavery was secondary to the story of Jackson’s stature in the guidebooks. They still referred to the plantation duties performed by slaves in the passive voice (food “was grown,” bricks “were made”), thereby avoiding direct references to slaves on the plantation. However, the guidebooks told some stories of particular house slaves at that time.¹⁶

¹⁵ Baud, Staff Survey.

¹⁶ Ladies’ Hermitage Association., “Ladies’ Hermitage Association Guidebooks,” 1889-1972, Administrative Collection, The Hermitage, Nashville, TN.

So what do visitors think of the interpretation of slavery at The Hermitage now that the site has incorporated its new outline? To evaluate the updated interpretation, The Hermitage designated an intern to conduct an outcome-based survey to determine what visitors were taking away from their visit to the site during the summer of 2012. The author of this thesis consulted with The Hermitage and the intern conducting the survey to include her research questions related to slavery interpretation at the site. Out of one hundred people surveyed, sixty of them had positive things to say about how slavery was interpreted at the site.¹⁷ Most of the visitors who did not like the interpretation were ones who did not participate in all that the site has to offer. Since the survey took place in the summer, many people did not want to walk out to the field quarters, and many of them also did not want to pay the extra money required to take the wagon tour. Some visitors who did not like the interpretation claimed that The Hermitage “whitewashed” the story of slavery by not including enough of the realities of the institution. Eleven people surveyed wanted the site to explain more about the harsh and cruel nature of slavery, and ten people would like to see and hear more information about Jackson’s relationship with his slaves and how he treated them.¹⁸ When answering the question of whether or not they liked how slavery is interpreted at the site, visitors of different ethnicities did not show a significant difference in opinion. However:

¹⁷ The author and Jane-Coleman Harbison were the primary surveyors for this project. They approached visitors at random on their way out of The Hermitage after touring the site.

¹⁸ Jane-Coleman Harbison, “Outcome-based Evaluation for ‘The Hermitage, Andrew Jackson, and a Changing America’” Project Report, August 2012, Ladies’ Hermitage Association, Administrative Collection, The Hermitage, Nashville, TN; Lauren Baud and Jane-Coleman Harbison. “‘The Hermitage, Andrew Jackson, and a Changing America’ Evaluation. July 2012, Ladies’ Hermitage Association, Administrative Collection, The Hermitage, Nashville, TN.

males tended to like the slavery interpretation in general, while women used more descriptive language such as ‘balanced’ or ‘not sugar-coated.’ Women did not seem as willing to say slavery was simply ‘part of history’ that should be accepted and not dwelled upon. Women were also more likely to say they did not feel the interpretation was in-depth or provided enough information. Men made up the largest group of people who said they had gained a new perspective on the issue.¹⁹

These are all things that the staff of The Hermitage should take into account when planning interpretive programs in the future. They should include more details about the lives of the enslaved people and what they had to endure rather than just describe their day-to-day lives.

A very common comment that those surveyed gave was that they thought The Hermitage should have African American interpreters to help tell the story of slavery. In a recent study at the Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park in Kennesaw, Georgia, that focused on determining African American attitudes toward the Civil War and the site, focus groups weighed in on some of the issues of interpretation. One focus group participant said, “We need to see people who look like us—Black people—to feel comfortable. They need to be a part of the staff and decision-makers.”²⁰ Reaching out to the black community is greatly aided by having black staff members, and The Hermitage could benefit from having a more diversified interpretive staff. This presents a problem, however, because the site cannot simply advertise that it would like to hire minorities for a certain position. There has to be an interest in the minority community in Nashville to work at The Hermitage, and to interest the minority community, the site must

¹⁹ Harbison, Project Report.

²⁰ Hermina Glass-Avery, “Assessing African American Attitudes Toward the Civil War,” Project Report, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA, 2011: 14.

consistently demonstrate that it cares about them and their story by making sure that their African American board members (of which there are currently two) are active in the community and by conducting more programming oriented at telling aspects of the African American story at the site.

At this time, Ashley Bouknight, the curatorial assistant at the site, is an African American. In an interview, she had this to say about interpreting slavery and the way that The Hermitage goes about it:

I think The Hermitage does a really, really good job at it. Just looking at how they've decided to really tackle the issue and sort of create a lot of discussion amongst visitors. I think that's the goal when you can sort of create discussion while the visitors are there and even when they leave. I think that's really important. And throughout the tours, whether it's the audio tour, the mansion interpretive tour, or even the wayside signs, there's always this element of how do we discuss everyone who lived on this site, not just the Jackson family. And I think that's important when you're dealing with sites because—especially sites that were relevant during earlier time periods. There was a diverse population on the sites. And I think it's a responsibility of the sites to really talk about the complete history, not just what's considered not offensive. And as historians, we always want to tell the history, but as a museum professional, you have to sort of understand that everyone is not going to not be okay with those stories.²¹

Bouknight also commented that it does bother her when she goes to sites that do not incorporate the story of slavery when they clearly should, but she also understands what goes on behind the scenes when it comes to issues of creating new interpretation.²²

Incorporating the African American story at historic institutions proves to be difficult in the South for a multitude of reasons, and The Hermitage has overcome many of these problems. One of these problems is the lack of sources. Sometimes the

²¹ Ashley Bouknight, Interview by Author, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, August 28, 2012.

²² Bouknight, Interview.

information on the enslaved people who lived at a historic house is simply not there, but often, if someone is willing to dig deep enough, the sources do exist. Public historians can pull very valuable information from them. If it is possible, oral histories with descendants of the African Americans who were at the site are invaluable sources to obtain. Another issue arises with the question of who should interpret African American history, and the answer is that everyone should. No matter the race of the interpreter, he or she should incorporate the story. Yet another issue stands with how to reconcile past attitudes with current perceptions of slavery. Including multiple perspectives helps the visitors to learn about the complexities of this issue and understand it more clearly. Another major issue is how current events influence the interpretation of history. Interpreters should be knowledgeable of the contextual information surrounding race relations in the present and the past to provide an educationally significant experience for the visitor.²³ However, retraining the interpreters presents another problem. A museum professional who worked at a historic house in Louisiana said in an email that change can be hard for many interpreters, especially when it involves learning new material to present to the public. Also, she found that her interpreters (who were all white females, aged sixty to eighty) thought that visitors would assume they were descended from slave owners and hold them accountable for what happened to the African Americans. They thus thought discussing the subject would bring up questions that they were not

²³ Max van Balgooy, "Strategies for Interpreting Slavery at Historic Sites," HistoricSites.WordPress.com, entry posted on September 15, 2008, <http://historicsites.wordpress.com/2008/09/15/slavery-interpretation-historic-sites-aaslh/> (accessed April 20, 2012).

comfortable answering.²⁴ However, these issues are not acceptable reasons to leave out the African American story.

Jackson's home is so unique in that it can discuss so many of the problems with equality in the nineteenth century, and it proves to be both a blessing and a curse in terms of community outreach and public engagement. Nowhere is this more evident than on the site's Facebook page. The comments from the public range from praise of the staff to discussions of how beautiful the grounds are to how great Andrew Jackson was. Comments there also rail against Jackson and his politics, and they are more vicious than those on any social media platform of any other presidential site in Tennessee.

One visitor wrote on the site's page: "I didn't want to say but when I was kid in Nashville we went on a trip for school and the guide had the nerve to say 'Andrew Jackson owned slaves but **he** was good to his slave, [sic]' I remember how I felt when she said that. I felt like spitting on his grave. He was a straight Demon."²⁵ Jackson is obviously still a very controversial figure, but the staff at The Hermitage realize this and have developed ways to discuss such controversies. The Hermitage has come to realize that it can help with this social issue, and the staff members at this site regularly engage in community events about the very divisive issues that Andrew Jackson was involved with over the course of his life and during his presidency in particular. Even though people continue to literally hate him and the site, its staff is working hard to help people

²⁴ Adrienne Berney, email message to author, February 10, 2012.

²⁵ Ladies' Hermitage Association, "The Hermitage, Home of President Andrew Jackson," comment posted June 12, 2013 www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=10151483464052869&id=581320242 (accessed June 27, 2013).

understand Jackson and the people he directly affected. Even the staff have mixed thoughts about Jackson, as both a president and an enslaver.

The changes that came about at The Hermitage were a product of a very extensive, well-researched, and well-funded plan. The Hermitage had a board of directors that supported the revamping of the interpretation, the site had a large professional staff that was capable of writing grants that had a very high chance of being funded, and it had a national and international audience who brought with them a variety of views of Andrew Jackson's life and legacy. For smaller plantation sites, it can be more difficult to implement such changes. Still, it is possible, and it is very necessary. Sites can no longer get away with ignoring part of history. They have to tell a more complete story if they want to satisfy their visitors and maintain good standing within the historical community. To do this, sites can reach out to their surrounding communities and ask for help, and they can take a gradual approach to implementing a new plan and retraining the interpretive staff, just as The Hermitage did.

Based on the suggestions of the staff and visitors, it might be a good idea for The Hermitage to think about creating more programs based on the slavery story, holding living history events, trying to diversify their interpretive staff, and reinforcing the story outlined in the interpretive guidelines for the interpreters to follow on the mansion tour.²⁶ In some cases the execution of the current interpretive plan is somewhat flawed. The staff should continue to build upon what is already there. They should also consider the changing community around them and the evolution of the museum audience.

²⁶ "Mansion Script and Interpreter Training Guidelines," 2010, Ladies' Hermitage Association, Administrative Collection, Nashville, TN; Baud, Staff Survey; Baud and Harbison, Evaluation.

Today, the mission statement of the Ladies' Hermitage Association is "to preserve the home of Andrew Jackson, to create learning opportunities, and to inspire citizenship through experiencing the life and unique impact of Andrew Jackson."²⁷ This is quite different from the original mission statement over a century ago, and it is much more fitting to a museum of its stature. The evolution of The Hermitage and its slavery interpretation shows that interpreting the story of slavery in a complex and thought-provoking manner is essential to creating an atmosphere that promotes a diverse perspective on the past and that encourages dialogue on the legacy of slavery in the present. Many visitors left the site seeing Jackson in a new light and appreciating the sacrifices of the African Americans who worked at The Hermitage. While it is far from perfect, The Hermitage has made a concerted effort to tell a more inclusive story over the years. Its efforts to be inclusive ensure that The Hermitage is an example for other plantation sites like it.

²⁷ Ladies' Hermitage Association, "Mission Statement," TheHermitage.com (accessed November 15, 2012).

CHAPTER II

SLAVERY AT THE ANCESTRAL HOME OF JAMES K. POLK

The James K. Polk Memorial Association came into being in 1924 as a result of the work of a great-niece of Sarah Polk, and shortly thereafter, in 1929, the home of James K. Polk's father in Columbia, Tennessee became a state-owned historic site dedicated to the preservation of the memory of the United States' eleventh president. Since its doors opened, the governing board of the Ancestral Home of James K. Polk has pursued the goal of perpetuating the memory of James K. Polk and his family, but there has always been an untold story—that of the Polk slaves. Polk's relationship to the institution of slavery was unique even to his contemporaries, and his decisions on that issue and on that of land expansion throughout his tenure in politics would greatly affect the happenings later in the nineteenth century. This chapter covers the history of the man, his ancestral home, and how the story of both is and should be told. Being that I, the author, worked at this site for three and a half years, I have both the researcher's perspective as well as an insider docent perspective on the issues at hand.

James K. Polk was born into the culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth century slave South. His father Samuel, a North Carolina farmer, bought enslaved men and women to help with his expanding farming operations. He immigrated to Tennessee in 1806 with seven enslaved people and began farming on 1,800 acres of land. James K. Polk was ten years old at the time. Samuel Polk's death in 1827 brought about the disbursement of his enslaved people to various family members, including James. Two enslaved male children, Hardy and Little Abe, became the property of James. Upon his

marriage to Sarah Childress in 1824, James Polk inherited ten of his wife's enslaved women and men, and Sarah's father also gave them another young man named Elias who remained with Sarah until her death in 1891.¹

Many of the Polk enslaved workers were descended from those who had been owned by the Polk family for generations. In fact, when a Polk family member died, he would often bequeath his slaves to other relatives, insuring that the enslaved people would remain within the larger Polk family. When Polk enslaved people engaged in "abroad" marriages -- to enslaved people from non-Polk households—the Polks sometimes purchased the enslaved men's and women's spouses in order to keep the people enslaved to the Polks within the "family." They did this to foster loyalty among the enslaved people and possibly to amass the fortunes of the extended Polk family.²

Enslaved people who worked in the house functioned closely to the Polk family. They lived in the kitchen building close to the Polks, or sometimes lived within the main house itself as in the case of Elias who lived with James and Sarah, or Harbert who lived in the Polk Home with James K. Polk's mother, Jane. Enslaved people who worked in the house generally were up early in the morning, completing tasks that were essential to run the household such as gathering wood and water, building up fires, and preparing meals. Their days were spent doing laundry, running errands, and mending clothes. Some house slaves were "rented" out to other households when there was not enough work to keep them busy.³

¹ James K. Polk Memorial Association, Administrative and Educational Collections, Columbia, TN, "A Matter of Utmost Caution": James K. Polk and Slavery" Exhibit Script, 2012.

² James K. Polk Memorial Association, "A Matter of Utmost Caution" Exhibit Script.

Polk's political actions on slavery varied depending on which elected position he held. As a U.S. Congressman from 1825 to 1839 representing a slaveholding constituency, he voted for every pro-slavery measure brought before Congress. As Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives 1835 to 1839 however, his main goal was to keep the business of government moving forward. He thought that the increasingly high numbers of pro and anti-slavery arguments coming before Congress slowed down the progress of the government and threatened the country's stability. To quiet both sides, Polk invoked the "gag rule" that prevented any legislation regarding slavery from being brought to the floor for discussion. As Governor of Tennessee from 1839 to 1841, when the state was divided over the issue (East Tennessee was strongly anti-slavery), Polk's views once again reflected that split, and he made an effort to remain neutral on the issue. As President of the United States, when the country was struggling with the implications of the "peculiar institution," Polk once again tried to keep slavery from becoming an even larger issue than it was, even though he was decidedly pro-slavery, fearing that it could tear the country apart.⁴ Polk doubled his slave holdings to over seventy people secretly as president, thinking that the institution would be the way he could afford to retire. He would not live long enough to see the implications of his public indecisiveness, however.

During the 1844 Presidential campaign, some individuals and groups wrote to Polk asking his views on slavery. Although he did not respond directly, his friend Gideon Pillow published a newspaper article that ran nationally stating that Polk was a

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

benevolent “master,” that he mostly owned people who had been bequeathed to him, and that his few purchased people had been acquired to keep their families together. This false story was intended to quiet the worries of Northern voters and challenge abolitionists who tried to portray Polk as a major slaveholder, which he in fact was.⁵

The country’s expansion to the Pacific Ocean during Polk’s presidency ignited a heated political debate over the possible extension of slavery into the new U.S. territories. To Polk, each side was as dangerous as the other. In his diary, he complained that both abolitionists and slavery advocates were using the issue to gain more political power. He worried that both sides were willing to divide the country to the point of civil war, and chastised them as unpatriotic and self-serving. Although he continued to quietly purchase enslaved men and women for his own gain, he denounced the politics of slavery.⁶ None of this complexity is reflected in the tour of the home that honors his legacy, however.

The Ancestral Home of James K. Polk has definite struggles in its slavery interpretation and has engaged in the “symbolic annihilation” of the memory of slavery and the African Americans subjected to it since it opened as a museum in 1929, but it has also recently begun to touch on it slightly, thus also discussing the issue in nearly all the ways defined by Eichstedt and Small in *Representations of Slavery*.⁷ Since it is the only home still standing in which James K. Polk ever lived (excluding the White House), it originally served as a shrine to Polk, much like how The Hermitage originally served as a

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Eichstedt and Small, 14-20.

shrine to Andrew Jackson. The key difference between the evolutions of the interpretation of these two sites is the fact that the staff of The Hermitage have chosen to make changes to its interpretation in much larger ways than the staff of the Polk Home. The ways in which the staff at the Ancestral Home of James K. Polk does this and the effects it has on its visitors are very clearly seen through the tour of the Home itself and the responses the visitors have to their tour through the Home and its grounds.

When a visitor comes to the Ancestral Home of James K. Polk for a tour, he or she starts out in the “Sisters’ House,” which was a family home in which two of Polk’s sisters lived but that now serves as the visitor’s center and staff office area of the site. After purchasing tickets, a guide leads visitors into the video room, where they then watch a ten-minute video made in the 1980s that covers the important points in Polk’s life. The video mentions slavery once, saying that it was an issue that tore the country apart, but that is the deepest it goes into the subject. After the video, visitors can look around the museum room in the Sisters’ House, which follows a timeline of when the Polk family first moved to Tennessee to the point when James K. Polk and Sarah Polk died. Throughout the timeline, there is discussion of politics, social issues, and economic issues of the time, but there is no discussion of the issue of slavery at any point.

Once on a tour of the home with a docent, it is up to that particular guide as to whether or not the issue of slavery is brought up. For most of the guides, it is not a topic of conversation, however. Whenever a guide might discuss slavery, it is usually brought up in the way that Polk viewed slavery from a political standpoint, not from his personal views, which were very different from each other, being that he was ambiguous about the

issue in the eyes of public and very much pro-slavery in his personal life. His wife Sarah's views on slavery are almost never discussed. She, being a Calvinistic Presbyterian, believed in predestination and thought that enslaved people were destined to their lot in life and she to hers. This is very different from the way her husband thought about the issue, which was almost exclusively from an economic viewpoint.

In the tour script, which every single docent deviates from in both good and bad ways, there is literally no mention of slavery, even though the Polks were major slave owners. Through the various tour guides and interpretations of history that they take on, the Polk Home touches on all of the ways of marginalizing the story of slavery that are brought up by Eichstedt and Small in their book. There are many ways to remedy this problem, including retraining the docents and teaching them new techniques to use the house and its rooms within a different context to discuss the issue and also making sure that they know the diverse history of the Home and of the Polk family and its enslaved people.

The interpretation gets a little bit tricky about the issue of slavery at the Polk Home because it is in fact the home of James K. Polk's father, Samuel Polk, and not of James. Most of James's enslaved men and women did not ever live in that house, except for the few that he inherited once his father died. However, Samuel Polk owned people, and they more than likely were the ones who built the Polk Home in 1816. In addition, the tour discusses James's entire career and hardly focuses on his parents at all, so including the story of his enslaved people would not be a difficult task in the least. Polk's presidential career was heavily focused on extending the domain of slavery, with

his personal slaveholdings and Mississippi plantation expanding rapidly during his tenure, so avoiding this point in the interpretation is extremely misleading.

While including the African American story in the house tour will enhance the site's interpretation, the story can also be extended to other areas of the site. The Polk Home does not have extensive grounds like that of The Hermitage, and it does not have multiple buildings to interpret like the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site, but it does have more room for interpretation beyond the house tour. Outside of the Home is a reconstructed kitchen building that is currently utilized for a permanent herb exhibit, which would be an ideal location for the discussion of slavery with interpretive panels or through an extended tour. Although, as Eichstedt and Small make clear, relegating the discussion of slavery to an outbuilding clearly demonstrates its lesser significance at the site. It should be part of the principal tour. Research has not shown that there were slave cabins on the property in Columbia, thus no fitting place for additional interpretation on slavery at other places at the site, but the kitchen would be a good place to bring out the topic of slavery in general and also to discuss Polk's extensive slave holdings in other states.



Figure 4: Side view of the Polk Home with the kitchen building in view, circa 1961, from the collection of the James K. Polk Memorial Association.

In an effort to introduce slavery interpretation at the site, a temporary exhibit went up in Polk Presidential Hall, the Home's exhibit hall, entitled "A Matter of Utmost Caution: James K. Polk and Slavery" from December 2011 to March 2012. It went into great detail about Polk's slaveholdings and his dealings with the institution both publicly and privately. The intention is for some of the panels to be placed in the kitchen building at the Home so that the African American story can become a permanent part of the tour. However, that would still create an atmosphere of segregated knowledge at the Home, and it would be much better to integrate the story into the spoken tour. This may be a problem with some of the "Old South" docents that work at the Home, however.

One way that this topic can be dealt with very easily beyond the necessary changes that need to happen within the culture of the organization is to discuss the house

itself and the rooms within it as artifacts and not relying on just the artifacts within the rooms. The Polk Home is a Federal style home built in 1816 in part or in whole by the labor of enslaved people.⁸ The style of the home, which is quite simple and indicative of the early era in which its builders constructed it, stands in stark contrast to the style of the furniture inside the home, which is mostly Empire style, purchased by Sarah Polk in 1848.⁹ This furniture sat in the Nashville home of the Polks for most of the 1800s, being moved to the house in Columbia in the 1920s. Other furniture in the home dates to the 1700s and belonged to Polk's parents, so there is no set rhyme or reason to the artifacts in the rooms at the Home.

⁸ A detailed description of Federal style architecture can be found in Rachel Carley, *The Visual Dictionary of American Domestic Architecture* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 1994): 91-99.

⁹ A detailed description of Empire style furniture can be found in Rosemary Troy Krill and Pauline K. Eversmann, *Early American Decorative Arts, 1620-1860: A Handbook for Interpreters*, 2nd ed. (Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2010), 89-102.



Figure 5: Exterior of the Polk Home, circa 1970, from the collection of the James K. Polk Memorial Association.



Figure 6: Parlor of the Polk Home, circa 1942, from the collection of the James K. Polk Memorial Association.



Figure 7: Parlor of the Polk Home, circa 1970, from the collection of the James K. Polk Memorial Association.

On the tour at the home, most of what the docents discuss is based on Polk's family life and political career, yet they say that they cannot discuss slavery because there are no artifacts related to the enslaved people who worked there. Some staff make the argument also that the enslaved people who worked at the Polk Home lived off-site, thus making it irrelevant to discuss their story because they did not physically live in the house. If this argument is to stand, then there should also be no discussion of Sarah Polk in the home either because she did not ever live in the house in question. However, she is pretty much the only topic discussed in the upstairs rooms of the house. To remedy this problem, docents need to discuss the structure of the home and how it was built. They need to discuss the work that went on in these rooms in addition to the family life that

took place there, like most of them do.¹⁰ A very good place to do this is the dining room, which has a door that leads out to the kitchen building. This door served as a major piece of my interpretation at the Home when I worked there, and it helped to open up the communication about slavery with visitors. The chamber pots and fireplace equipment upstairs are also very good jumping off points for discussing the issues of slavery in the Home. Thus, there are actually many avenues to discuss slavery



Figure 8: Bedroom in the Polk Home, showing chamber pot, 2010, from the collection of Lauren Baud.

¹⁰ A detailed description of domestic life in the rooms of a house can be found in Jessica H. Foy and Thomas J. Schlereth, eds., *American Home Life, 1880-1930: A Social History of Spaces and Services* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992).



Figure 9: Parlor and dining room of the Polk Home, showing door that leads outside to kitchen building, circa 1970, from the collection of the James K. Polk Memorial Association.¹¹

The executive staff of the Polk Home obviously needs to address the story of the enslaved people who belonged to Polk and his family, but some issues do arise with this necessary action. Some of the research is there, and there is plenty of information about the Polk family and the enslaved people who they owned. However, the docents at the Home pose a problem. Most of them are anywhere from their sixties to their eighties in age, and most of them were born and raised in the South. One docent has mentioned to me several times how slavery was not a cause of the Civil War, and I have heard many of

¹¹ All photos are from James K. Polk Memorial Association, Administrative and Educational Collections, Columbia, TN, and the personal collection of Lauren Baud.

the docents make racist remarks when no visitors are present. This is a problem that is not easily remedied. We are trained as docents to not give our personal opinion on events in history on the tour, but these attitudes are present at all times. This kind of image prevents the attendance of a more diverse audience at the Home. The docents at the site need to be retrained on the tour information and on basic hospitality.

Changes in attitude need to come with tour changes, and this goes for the entire staff. When interviewed about the slavery exhibit, the curator of the Polk Home stated, “This is something that we don’t really get to cover in our tours at the James K. Polk site. There just isn’t a good place for it. But we felt it was something that needed to be looked at.”¹² That statement is the epitome of the white elitist interpretation of slavery at historic sites and is a major contributing factor as to why African Americans often do not visit them, as noted by John Falk in his 1993 study.¹³ Not only does the statement portray a falsehood (that there is no good place to talk about slavery on the regular tour), but it also tells African Americans that their story is not important enough to be included. The comment also portrayed the exhibit on slavery as compensatory, and that does not look very good to potential visitors. The Ancestral Home of James K. Polk has a long way to go towards equal representation of both races in its interpretation, but the research is there and the story is just waiting to be told.

So why is it so important for the history of the enslaved people and the significance of the physical spaces to the white and black people who lived in them to be

¹² Susan Thurman, “Polk Exhibit Examines Figure’s Views on Slavery,” *The Daily Herald*, January 10, 2012. <http://www.columbiadailyherald.com/sections/news/local/polk-exhibitexamines-figure%E2%80%99s-views-slavery.html> (accessed March 2, 2012).

¹³ John H. Falk, “Leisure Decisions Influencing African-American Use of Museums,” *Visitor Behavior* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1993) 11-12.

told and explained to all visitors? For one thing, the visitors want it. In the summers of 2012 and 2013, eight out of eleven visitors who answered a survey about the interpretation of slavery at the Polk Home stated that they thought the tour guides should bring up the topic on the tour. The three survey participants who did not explicitly state that they wanted the issue to be discussed either declined to answer the question or stated that they thought the issue was not purposefully avoided. The eight who did agree that the topic should be a part of the tour stated that they wanted to know more about Polk's father's position on the matter, Polk's position on it, how many enslaved people they had, more information on the kitchen building, how the people of the home depended on the enslaved workers, and more information about the enslaved people who worked on the farms and plantations off site. Two of these survey responders stated that based on the tour, they thought that the Polks lived without slaves. One African American woman stated that she thought the docent (who was white) did not discuss the issue because she and her family are black.¹⁴ This is an image that the Polk Home absolutely should not be portraying of itself, but that is, in fact, what it is doing. (See Appendix C.)

The rest of the data collected from the Polk Home visitor surveys is very telling about the sustainability of the current interpretation at the site. Conducted over the busiest season on some of the busiest days, the survey still only yielded eleven responses. Of those, ten respondents identified themselves as White or Caucasian, with one respondent self-identifying as Black. Only two respondents were under forty-five years of age, with

¹⁴ Lauren Baud, Slavery Interpretation at the Ancestral Home of James K. Polk Visitor Survey, July 2012-May 2013.

most being well above that age.¹⁵ Overall, this is the general makeup of the visitorship to the Ancestral Home of James K. Polk—a visitorship that only totals 10,000 each year, which is much lower than that of Tennessee’s other presidential sites.¹⁶ If the museum would like to sustain itself very far into the future, it needs to majorly revamp its interpretation and its ways of marketing itself to a younger and more diverse generation—a generation that wants to see all sides of the story told and given proper credit.

In addition to the fact that visitors want to hear this information, hearing a more inclusive story gives them a better image of the time and the political figure being portrayed. It also helps them remember the information more clearly. In a recent email from the director of the Ancestral Home of James K. Polk, he said this about a tour that he had recently conducted at the Home:

When I mentioned President Polk's Mississippi plantation during a Polk Home tour, one of the guests said that the woman who had been her guide here on a previous tour had described how the mortality rate on Polk's property was higher than on most plantations. I know that you included good information from “A Matter of Utmost Caution” in your tours, so I'm guessing that you were the docent who made the strong impression. Even if you weren't the docent, you nevertheless helped plan the exhibit that included the information. I thought that you'd like to know.¹⁷

This demonstrates how this kind of information stays with people and how it helps them to remember and appreciate what people had to go through in the past, which should be one of the aims of any historic site.

¹⁵ Lauren Baud, Slavery Interpretation at the Ancestral Home of James K. Polk Visitor Survey.

¹⁶ John Holtzapple, email message to author, July 13, 2013.

¹⁷ John Holtzapple, email message to author, March 25, 2013.

Not only does telling the story of the men and women who were enslaved by President Polk paint a broader and more complete picture of the life of the Polk family, it does the same for the families of the enslaved who worked under them. Learning about one's heritage and family history is so important and dear to so many people, including African Americans, whose family histories are often so difficult to uncover. Ora Lee Polk Phillips traced her family history back to Julius Polk, an enslaved man who worked on James K. Polk's plantation in Yalobusha County, Mississippi. In an interview on October 22, 2008, Ms. Phillips stated that Julius Polk "left us with some history there to cherish for the rest of our lives."¹⁸ To her, the history of her ancestor is one to be revered and told to generations to come, even going so far to say that she was "honored" that Polk had a plantation in Mississippi and that her ancestor worked there.¹⁹ She wants to ensure that a record exists that details her family history for all the generations of her family. The story of her ancestor is just as important as that of any of the Polk ancestors, and it should be a story that receives proper credit from the home that is meant to detail the history of a slaveholder president.

The answers the visitors gave on the interpretation of slavery survey that I conducted at the Polk Home were very different from those I received from the majority of the staff at the site. Every single docent, except one who is professionally trained in museum studies, answered the question, "Are you satisfied with how this site interprets race and slavery?," with "Yes," or with an explanation as to why he or she does not discuss it on the tour, including saying that the tour "covers Polk's young years" and that

¹⁸ Ora Lee Polk Phillips, Interview with Brian Rose, October 22, 2008.

¹⁹ Ibid.

“the emphasis is on Polk—the driven man, the expansionist, not on Polk's personal bouts with slavery.”²⁰ This attitude is common and problematic among the docents. In addition, some of the docents literally do not know the history of the enslaved people at the site or of Polk’s dealings with slavery period. On a special tour of the kitchen building developed by one particular docent for school field trips, she stated that the Polk children had to do the kitchen chores because the Polks did not own slaves. This statement is most likely not directly intended to cover up a certain part of the history of the site, even though that is what it does. This statement is most likely due to poor training and a simple lack of knowledge on the part of this docent. However, this could be easily remedied with regular evaluation of the staff, which is something that one of the members of the executive staff believes should be done based on the survey I conducted in 2012.²¹

The executive staff at the site had their own opinions on the matter as well. One of the executive staff members stated that he was not currently satisfied with the way it is interpreted but that he would be once panels from the temporary slavery exhibit from early 2012 were placed in the kitchen building at the site. That was supposed to happen last summer, but the panels are currently still not up in the kitchen building. Even if they were in place, however, that would still not be enough interpretation for the entire site. This staff member also stated that it is difficult to discuss slavery at the site because “The site doesn't have original artifacts that belonged to Polk slaves.” That is why it is so important to discuss the home itself and the rooms inside of it as artifacts and not just rely

²⁰ Lauren Baud, Slavery Interpretation at the Ancestral Home of James K. Polk Staff Survey, July-August 2012.

²¹ Lauren Baud, Slavery Interpretation at the Ancestral Home of James K. Polk Staff Survey.

on the artifacts inside those rooms.

Another member of the executive staff stated that he was “not entirely” satisfied with how slavery is interpreted at the site, saying, “Although we have researched and interpreted slavery through an exhibition, we need to do a better job of incorporating it into the docent handbook and the regular tour.” One of the docents also stated that he thought that if they were to be expected to discuss it on a more regular basis, there should be more information on it in the docent handbook and in their training, though he did not believe the issue should be discussed because it does not “fit” with the theme of the tour.²² Like so many other historic house museums in the South, there is a severe problem with attitudes toward slavery from the staff at the site, and there is also a very detrimental issue with miscommunication between the executive staff and the tour guides based on this survey, but it would not appear that way on the outside based on the quote in *The Daily Herald* from the Home’s curator.

The Polk Home has a very long way to go in its interpretation of race and slavery, but with a new perspective on the house and its artifacts and with newly trained docents, it can present a more inclusive story. . With its mission to “operate, maintain, preserve, and restore the Polk Ancestral Home and properties, its grounds, and appurtenances, and to perpetuate the memory of the eleventh President of the United States,” they also need to perpetuate the memory of the people who made it possible for him to have his extensive political career and status in the world.²³ Knowing the history and the context of the house, its contents, and the people there is of utmost importance, however, and

²² Ibid.

²³ James K. Polk Memorial Association, Administrative and Educational Collections, Columbia, TN.

more in-depth research into that is the most pressing matter in the change that needs to come. The Ancestral Home of James K. Polk has a massive amount of potential, but it needs a staff and a governing board that can fully realize that potential. If it is to survive as a museum in the coming years, the staff attitudes and the interpretation at the site will have to change.

CHAPTER III

SLAVERY'S STORY AT THE ANDREW JOHNSON NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

Andrew Johnson is perhaps one of the most misunderstood men in United States history. Of Tennessee's three presidents, he has the least sterling political reputation, but of the three historic homes of Tennessee's presidents, the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site is the only one that enjoys the status of being a national park. President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Andrew Johnson National Monument under the National Park Service in 1942.¹ It was recognized as a historic site before that time, however, with the Daughters of the American Revolution erecting a historical marker at the site in 1926. The site includes Johnson's early home, his tailor shop, his homestead, a national cemetery, and a visitor center. It officially became the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site in 1963.² Like Jackson and Polk, the historic site commemorating his presidency and his life has a unique way of telling the story of slavery in its relationship to Johnson and his presidency. This chapter covers the history of Andrew Johnson and his dealings with slavery, the ways in which his home discusses slavery, the way the public sees the slavery story, and the ways in which the story is effective and how it could be more effective.

¹ National Parks Conservation Association, "State of the Parks: Andrew Johnson National Historic Site, A Resource Assessment," 2008: 4.

² National Parks Conservation Association, "State of the Parks," 4.



Figure 10: Daughters of the American Revolution historical marker at the Homestead of the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site, photo by Lauren Baud.

Andrew Johnson was not born into a successful family like James K. Polk. He had much more humble beginnings, more akin to those of Andrew Jackson, though he was never in the military, and he certainly did not become a hero to the American people. Attitudes toward Johnson as a president have evolved over the years, but he still is not considered anywhere near the level of the “great” presidents. His beginnings and his long struggle to climb the social ladder shaped his views and his actions for the rest of his life, especially in regards to slavery. His father died when he was three years old in 1811, and he lived in poverty with his mother and had to start working as a tailor’s apprentice at age nine to ease the strain on his mother’s finances. His wife Eliza, who he married in 1827, was responsible for most of Johnson’s literacy skills. He entered the world of politics in

1828 and stayed in it until his death in 1875, serving at almost every level of local, state, and federal government.³

Johnson was a supporter for slavery early on, but, according to author Annette Gordon-Reed, he was able to accept its destruction following the Civil War “not because of what that meant for black people, but because of what he thought it would mean for the class from which he sprang: poor whites.”⁴ He had seen the “planter aristocracy” and their enslaved people as a way to oppress lower class white citizens, like himself. Gordon-Reed argues that Andrew Johnson’s racism directly affected his choices in policy and law, and she argues that people must come to terms with that fact.⁵

Aaron Astor follows this train of thought in an article written in August 2013 about the ongoing celebration of “Emancipation Day,” which took place on August 8, 1863. It was at that time that Andrew Johnson reversed his ideas on emancipation, an idea he opposed so much just a few months before that he convinced Abraham Lincoln to not include Tennessee in the January 1863 Emancipation Proclamation. Astor states that:

As president, his utter disregard for the rights of freed people to equal justice under the law and the right to vote infuriated much of the Northern and ex-slave population in the first years after the war. His intransigence sabotaged the ambitions of former slaves to attain land, thus helping condemn much of the black population to generations of landless peonage. Johnson styled himself as America’s last Jacksonian Democrat, willing to fight for the rights of the white working class and yeomanry in the face of Southern aristocrats and Northern industrialists alike. He stayed loyal to the Union — as Jackson had done during Nullification Crisis in South Carolina in the early 1830s — and then fought for the return of the Southern states to the Union with as little Federal interference as

³ Ibid., 2.

⁴ Annette Gordon-Reed, *Andrew Johnson*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2011), 10.

⁵ Gordon-Reed, 11.

possible. The world had changed dramatically around him, but Andrew Johnson would not budge.⁶

Johnson's political decisions produced decades of ripple effects that negatively affected the lives of African Americans in this country. That, however, is not the side of the story that is explained in detail at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site.

Andrew Johnson handled slavery in his personal life quite differently than he did in his political life. Most visitors to his home in Greeneville, Tennessee learn about his political views on slavery during the tour. Johnson purchased his first person in 1842, a fourteen-year-old girl named Dolly. The family story goes that she saw him at an auction and asked him to buy her because she thought that he looked kind. He then also purchased her brother, Sam, to whom Robert Johnson, son of Andrew, later deeded a house and land in Greeneville following emancipation. Dolly never married, yet she had three children—Liz, Florence, and William—all of whom had light skin. Some historians believe that Andrew Johnson himself could be the father to Dolly's three children, but guides at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site state that Robert and Charles Johnson, Andrew Johnson's sons, were the fathers of her children.⁷ They will particularly go into detail about William Johnson, whose death certificate, as reported by the guides to visitors, lists Robert Johnson as his father.

William Johnson is the one enslaved man owned by Andrew Johnson on whom guides go into particularly close detail when asked by visitors about slavery and what happened to Johnson's slaves after emancipation, and he has a very interesting life story.

⁶ Aaron Astor, "When Andrew Johnson Freed His Slaves," *The New York Times* Opinion Pages, August 9, 2013, accessed August 24, 2013.

⁷ Gordon-Reed, 38-39.

Born into slavery under Andrew Johnson, he was free by age five. In an interview for a newspaper article in 1937, William Johnson stated that, “One day Mrs. Johnson called us all in and said we were free now. She said we were free to go, or we could stay if we wanted to. We all stayed.”⁸ Their emancipation occurred in 1863, and the reporter for *The Washington Daily News* saw their staying as a sign that the enslaved people under Johnson had an unwavering loyalty to the man. In reality, the dangers of the raging war and the fact that Dolly might not want to separate her children from their biological father(s) and live in a world where she would struggle to support herself and her children are what kept the Johnson’s former slaves in Greeneville.⁹ When remembering his time with Andrew Johnson, William stated that “Mr. Andrew used to hold me on one knee and my sister on the other, and he’d rub our heads and laugh.”¹⁰

William Johnson grew up in Greeneville and became a cook in a local restaurant. He lived in poverty most of his life, however, and Ernie Pyle asked him in 1937 if he had been better off when Andrew Johnson owned him. William’s response was to say, “Yes, we were mighty well off then. But any man would rather be free than be a slave. Some of us had fine masters, and we were better off. But some of them had awful bad masters.”¹¹ Whenever he had too much trouble financially, however, people in the town of Greeneville would come to his aid. He was along the lines of a local celebrity—a reminder of the past. Before his death in May 1943, William Johnson met President

⁸ Ernie Pyle, “Slave of President Johnson Still Alive and Quite Happy,” *The Washington Daily News*, February 17, 1937.

⁹ Pyle; Astor.

¹⁰ Pyle.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Franklin Roosevelt and became a hot topic of many news stories.¹² The story of William, his mother, his sisters, and his uncle are so important to the story at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site. While they are mentioned frequently and highlighted in certain parts of the interpretation, their full story is not always shown because of the lack of political context at the Johnson site.

A tour at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site begins in the Visitor Center, which includes a thirteen-minute video and an exhibit about Johnson's life and political career. The video takes on Johnson's views of slavery and emancipation in a very realistic and easily understandable way, and the exhibit throughout the visitor center discusses his pitfalls and his triumphs as president of the United States. Across the street from the Visitor Center is the "Early Home," in which Johnson lived from the 1830s to 1851. In the Early Home, visitors can see more information about Johnson's early life, including his path from tailor to politician. It also discusses when Johnson purchased his first people and includes a family tree for the Johnsons and their enslaved men and women. This kind of interpretation leans toward the "relative inclusion" side of the spectrum discussed by Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small in *Representations of Slavery*.¹³ Not the entire site engages that fully with the story of slavery, however.

¹² Ibid.; *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, "87-Year-Old Former Slave of President Johnson Dies," May 17, 1943.

¹³ Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small, *Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002).



Figure 11: The “Early Home” at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site, photo by Lauren Baud.

“The Homestead” is the home that the Johnsons owned from 1851 to 1875, and it is located just a couple of blocks away from the Visitor Center at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site. For most visitors, this is the main attraction of the site since it is the home where the Johnsons lived at the start of the Civil War, and it is the home in which visitors receive a guided tour from a park ranger. On the tour of the Homestead, park rangers cover the history of Andrew Johnson’s marriage and family, including deaths, addictions, illnesses, and war. The Homestead tour focuses quite a lot on the effects of the Civil War on the Johnsons, their home, and their state. Since the Homestead was occupied by Union soldiers during the Civil War, guides go into detail about the disrepair of the home after the war and the graffiti that was left throughout the house,

including the phrase “the old traitor,” which you can still see in an upstairs bedroom. The rest has since been covered with wallpaper.



Figure 12: The “Homestead” at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site, from the collection of the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site.

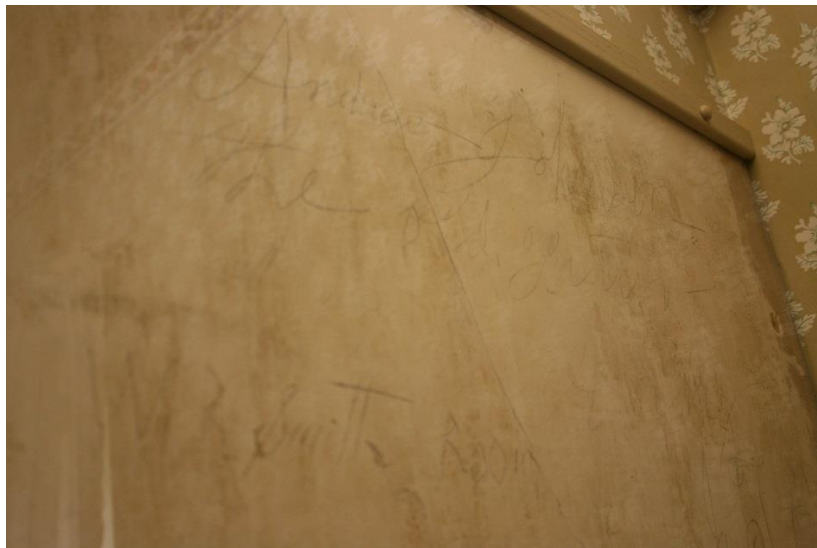


Figure 13: “The Old Traitor” graffiti in the Homestead at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site, photo by Lauren Baud.

The discussion of slavery at the Homestead does not come up in the house until the tour reaches the dining room and the kitchen area, towards the end of the tour. Most of the discussion revolves around Dolly, her brother Sam, and Dolly’s children,

especially William. Any discussion of slavery in the Homestead revolves around Johnson's treatment of his enslaved people and how much they enjoyed it there. There is no discussion of his political actions and feelings toward slavery and race equality, which were quite racist. This is in direct contrast to how slavery is never mentioned at the Ancestral Home of James K. Polk, which guides only discuss in the political sense and hardly ever from a personal perspective. This is most likely due to the fact that Polk was very ambiguous about the issue of slavery in the public arena, yet he had large slaveholdings in his private life. Johnson, on the other hand, did not engage in plantation slavery and was what would be deemed a "good master" by standards of the time, yet in his political life, he promoted pro-slavery and later overtly racist legislation.¹⁴ If visitors inquire about Johnson's slaveholdings and slavery under him, guides will tell them that he was "opposed to plantation slavery for economic reasons."

Most of the guides at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site answer questions related to slavery when it does come up in ways that are intelligent and thoughtful, however. In June of 2013, a woman on one tour tried to argue that all slaves were treated well, and a guide responded that he did not like to make generalizations about slavery. Most of the other interactions and discussions about this topic that I observed when I took multiple tours of the site in the fall of 2012 and summer of 2013 were intellectual and based on academic research, and this reflects the training that the National Park Service (NPS) provides for its employees. Unlike a nonprofit, the National Park Service, being part of a branch of the United States government, is subject to stricter rules regarding site

¹⁴ Aaron Astor, "When Andrew Johnson Freed His Slaves," *The New York Times* Opinion Pages, August 9, 2013, accessed August 24, 2013.

interpretation and training of employees. All NPS sites discuss multiple aspects of United States history, including that of African Americans and women. Employees also undergo online and in-person training regarding difficult interpretive topics. So while the tour at the Homestead borders on “segregation of knowledge”, its interpreters know how to answer questions regarding slavery when it comes up due to their training.

Another interesting fact about the tour of the Homestead is that most of the guides are very open to discussing the fact that Andrew Johnson’s sons, Charles and Robert, had children with Dolly. Bringing up this topic shows an openness to discussing various interpretations of the past on the part of the rangers at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site, and it is something to which many visitors had a response and that helped them see slavery in ways that they perhaps had not seen the issue before. The fact that the staff at the site is so well-trained and the fact that they do not shun or deflect visitor questions on the issue of slavery shows a step in the right direction for the interpretation at the site.

In a survey I conducted in June 2013 at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site, all participating staff members stated that they either had an undergraduate or graduate degree, and they all gave substantiated arguments for their positions on the issue of slavery at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site. The four staff members, three of whom identified themselves as White or Caucasian and one who identified himself as African American, who answered the survey stated that they thought the site as a whole

did a good job of interpreting the story of slavery.¹⁵ When asked if they could think of any way to improve the slavery interpretation, one staff member stated:

I think it is important to briefly to explain to visitors where Johnson's freed slaves ended up in life. Johnson assisted them by providing housing and even land to help secure future prosperity for Sam and Dolly. I also think it is important for visitor to realize where we have “gaps” in the slave story so we can demonstrate that we have only a few pieces of the puzzle regarding Slavery in East Tennessee, and therefore we are not neglecting to tell the entire story, but we can extrapolate ideas based on the solid information that we do have.¹⁶

Another staff member stated, “We talk in great detail during the tours about ‘the other Johnson family.’ During the tour we cover what we can in the length of time we have. Some people would like to know more while some are satisfied with the information they get quickly.”¹⁷ Responses like this show that the staff know the limitations of their story and are aware of it, but it also shows that they think about this on a regular basis and know that it is an important story, even if they do not know how to fully incorporate it on their tours.

The staff members at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site think well of the slavery interpretation at the site for the most part, but what do the visitors think? In a survey I conducted in June 2013, eleven out of sixteen visitors stated that they liked how slavery was interpreted on the tour of the Homestead.¹⁸ The remaining five respondents

¹⁵ Lauren Baud, Slavery Interpretation at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site Staff Survey, June 2013.

¹⁶ Lauren Baud, Slavery Interpretation at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site Staff Survey.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Lauren Baud, Slavery Interpretation at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site Visitor Survey, June 2013.

stated that they did not hear enough information on the issue to form an opinion on the interpretation, that they had mixed or ambiguous feelings on the discussion of the issue, or that they thought it needed just a little more information to make it better.¹⁹ Depending on which guide led the tours and how interested the guests on any one particular tour were in the issue of slavery dictated how well or poorly they thought the site did with slavery interpretation.

One visitor in particular stated that he thought the casual observer might come away with perspective that Johnson was “a pioneer in ending slavery.” His guide avoided discussing (just implied) that Johnson was in favor of slavery politically and only discussed how he was against secession. This visitor thought that while the site does discuss slavery, the discussion could be a little bit misleading to someone who did not know a lot about Andrew Johnson and his politics. This visitor also suggested that guides should discuss Johnson’s “personal dealings with his slaves within the context of his personal political views on slavery” and should compare his views to those of his contemporaries, such as Abraham Lincoln.²⁰ Another visitor stated that in the Visitor Center, the “mention of Johnson's ‘slave family’ needs to be explained like it is on the tour to avoid confusing visitors and letting them think that it was typical to think of enslaved people in that way.”²¹ This visitor also stated that she would like to see more information on the day-to-day activities of the enslaved people who worked in the

¹⁹ Lauren Baud, Slavery Interpretation at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site Visitor Survey.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

Homestead. Other visitors also stated that they would like to see more information on how slavery came to East Tennessee and how it was different from or alike to slavery in other areas of the country and even the state.²² These visitors came to the site with a general knowledge of the man and the times in which he lived, but what about the visitors that did not have much background knowledge of Andrew Johnson or life in the 1800s?

Some people who took a tour of the Homestead came away with a very different view of Andrew Johnson and his relationship to slavery. Some of them enjoyed how the guides left out Johnson's political dealings with slavery, stating that it was not his fault that "the founding fathers incorporated slavery into our country."²³ However, some of them who said things along that line came away with the idea that Johnson was opposed to slavery, which is not true. Some visitors stated that they liked how slavery was presented "positively" and that they enjoyed the discussion of Johnson keeping enslaved families together and how he freed his slaves and paid them.²⁴ All of this points to Johnson being painted as a "good master," (just like Andrew Jackson) as defined by Jennifer Eichstedt and Stephen Small.²⁵ While Johnson may not have abused his enslaved workers, he certainly did not believe in freeing them until he saw no other choice, and he did not believe in providing any kind of equality for them under the law. This is a message that guides and the rest of the site interpretation should get across to visitors.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Eichstedt and Small, 20-30.

How people view slavery is affected by their life experiences and background, so it is impossible to satisfy every person's wish when they visit a historic site. For instance, most people who answered that they were completely satisfied with the interpretation of slavery at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site were over fifty years old and identified themselves as white or Caucasian. Most of the respondents who stated that they would like more information on the issue on the tour were between the ages of twenty-five and forty-nine and also identified themselves as white or Caucasian. One can see the difference in the generational perspective of the interpretation at this site. That is something that this site and many others will have to deal with in the coming years because to remain relevant, museums must appeal to the younger generations. They also must reach out to people of various backgrounds, which is something that was not very evident at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site. No respondents to this survey identified themselves as belonging to any other race besides white or Caucasian. With many historic house museums facing decreased visitation, including the Johnson site, which has seen its visitation numbers drop from nearly 70,000 visitors per year in 2008 to just above 51,000 visitors per year in 2012, these sites must reach out to more diverse audiences through programming and tours that incorporate a the full story of the people who lived at these sites—slave and free, white and black, young and old.²⁶

To make the interpretation of slavery stronger at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site, guides and senior park staff should take some of the advice from their

²⁶ Lauren Baud, Slavery Interpretation at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site Visitor Survey; National Park Service, "NPS Annual Recreation Visits Report for: 2007 to 2012," <https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/SSRSReports/System%20Wide%20Reports/5%20Year%20Annual%20Report%20By%20Park>, accessed September 10, 2013.

visitors. The story of slavery on the tour should discuss Andrew Johnson's political views on the issue of slavery as well as his personal dealings with it to provide a deeper context for the visitors. They should include stories of the day-to-day lives of the enslaved people who worked there—Dolly, her brother Sam, and Dolly's three children. This site is so incredibly lucky to know as much as it does about the enslaved people who lived there—a luxury not afforded by many other sites. The guides could discuss the housework and even the customs of Dolly and her family in multiple rooms while also discussing the white family and what the house endured during the Civil War.



Figure 14: The Dining Room of the Homestead at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site, from the collection of the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site.



Figure 15: Photos of the enslaved family (Dolly, her children, and her brother Sam) in the dining room of the Homestead at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site, photo by Lauren Baud.



Figure 16: The Kitchen of the Homestead at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site, from the collection of the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site.

One visitor at the Homestead in June of 2013 was particularly moved by the story of Andrew Johnson's sons being the fathers to Dolly's three children. She, a white visitor over the age of fifty, enjoyed the frankness of the discussion and of the realities of the time. She commented after her survey that as a southerner, she is very remorseful that slavery ever existed. She researched her family history and saw no evidence of slave ownership. She said that fact makes her very happy, stating "I would rather be poor than to have made it on the backs of slaves."²⁷ While not everyone is this passionate about the story of slavery or feels that way about their own family history, this particular visitor found the interpretation of the particular guide to be insightful, and it made her examine her own world views. That is what makes museums effective, and that is what brings visitors back and makes them appreciate a museum's existence. This visitor, in fact, stated that she is thankful that public federal funding goes to preserve the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site.²⁸

Also, though this is not something that seems to be a focus for many guides because they do understand the complexities of slavery, they should try to avoid painting Andrew Johnson as a "good master" because even though he may have treated his enslaved workers with kindness in most aspects, he still believed that he had a right to own their freedom and to ensure that they could not be equal to him or his white family. In a word, the interpretation at the site should be more cohesive. It should cover all aspects of Johnson's life, personally and politically, and how that affected his family and

²⁷ Lauren Baud, Slavery Interpretation at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site Visitor Survey.

²⁸ Ibid.

the enslaved men and women who worked under him. The National Park Service on the whole does make an effort to include “untold stories” and stories of the oppressed, as does this site in particular, so most of these suggestions are to improve what the site already does.

The Andrew Johnson National Historic Site has not quite developed its slavery interpretation to the level of The Hermitage, but it is well beyond that of the Ancestral Home of James K. Polk. While the training at the Johnson site is more involved and comprehensive, and the site enjoys a certain level of protection by being under the umbrella of the federal government, it faces challenges in progressing and making changes unlike those of the other two presidential sites in Tennessee. Being under the control of the United States government, while having many perks, can also be a hindrance, especially when facing mandatory budget cutbacks and sequestration. This prevents staff from developing new programs, enhancing the exhibits, and bringing on new staff to provide more services. Also, trying to make any changes to interpretation in the wayside exhibits or permanent exhibits in the Visitor Center or the Early Home would take many levels of approval, which can take months or years to receive.

Like many museums, the staff members at the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site do the best they can with what they have, but small changes like adding to or refining the Homestead tour are easily achieved. If the staff can implement small changes, including better marketing on places like Facebook and Twitter and the inclusion of a more comprehensive story on the guided tour, the site could possibly see more visitors over the coming years, especially with an economy that is now heading upward instead of

downward. This would be an opportune time for the site staff to adjust the focus of the tour to appeal to the up and coming visitors who will hopefully be able to experience and learn about the site's importance in ways that appeal to them. However, attracting more and new visitors is just one of the many reasons this site and others should interpret slavery. It is also the ethically right thing to do, and national standards of excellence tell us that too.

CONCLUSION

With a difficult past comes a reticent present. This is most obviously reflected in the history of race relations in the state of Tennessee. Race relations past and present provide problems with interpreting the history of African Americans in many communities across the state. Many historic sites all across the South (including Tennessee) have made a concerted effort at telling a more complete story of all people associated with them, but Tennessee still has many sites that are entirely silent when it comes to the history of African Americans and the issues that come along with it. If a site wants to be historically accurate and culturally relevant, it needs to include the history of the African Americans, a history that is present at almost all historic sites in Tennessee. Most museum goers of the twenty-first century expect a balanced and accurate interpretation at any site they visit, and so it is the duty and is in the best interest of any historic site to include all aspects of its history if they want to appeal to a wide audience, meet national standards, and be ethically responsible. While many historic sites across Tennessee do not fully interpret African American history, it is their ethical obligation and should be their desire to do so, and they should take steps to move toward that goal.

In the twenty-first century, discussion of slavery in the public realm has become not only acceptable but also widespread. There are still huge debates over its implications and the memory of it, but the discussion is there. Ira Berlin argues that “slavery has a greater presence than at any time since the end of the Civil War” now in the twenty-first century.¹ Slavery has been present in films, television, monuments, museums, roadside

¹ Ira Berlin, “Coming to Terms with Slavery in Twenty-First-Century America,” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, eds. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (New York and London: The New Press, 2006), 2.

markers, freedom trails, books, websites, and other various forms of media. According to Berlin, “slavery is ground zero of race relations.”² This is why it is important to view slavery in its larger context and not solely in relation to the Civil War. It existed for hundreds of years in this country, and its memory still burdens our history, especially in the South. In the words of Berlin, “If the omnipresence of race in American history provided the dismal specter of permanence, race’s ever-changing character suggests its malleability. That it could be made in the past argues that it can be re-made in the future—a prospect that provides all the more reason to come to terms with slavery.”³ One of the most important things to remember is that the museum should be a space for dialogue about such issues, even if that approach does not work for every visitor.⁴ It should help to create a new understanding between the races and to provide a safe place to have discussions about race and its history here in the United States, in the South, and in Tennessee.

Incorporating the African American story at historic institutions proves to be difficult in the South for a multitude of reasons. One of these problems is the lack of easily obtainable sources. Sometimes the information on the enslaved people who lived at a historic house is difficult to find , but often, if someone is willing to dig deep enough, the sources do exist. Public historians can pull very valuable information from them. If it

² Ibid., 3.

³ Ibid., 17.

⁴ Monica Eileen Patterson, “Teaching Tolerance through Objects of Hatred: The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia as “Counter-Museum” in *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places*, eds. Erica Lehrer, Cyntia E. Milton, and Monica Eileen Patterson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 62-65.

is possible, oral histories with descendants of the African Americans who were at the site are invaluable sources to obtain. Another issue arises with the question of who should interpret African American history, and the answer is that everyone should. No matter the race of the interpreter, they should incorporate the story because the story of slavery is everyone's story, not just that of one particular race. History is shared by all people.

Yet another issue stands with how to reconcile past attitudes with current perceptions of slavery. Including multiple perspectives helps the visitors to learn about this issue better. A very big issue is how current events influence the interpretation of history. Interpreters should be knowledgeable of the contextual information surrounding race relations in the present and the past to provide an educationally significant experience for the visitor.⁵ "Historical interpretations of difficult knowledge...encourage audiences to respond to the histories of oppression and violence enough to care what happened in the past and eventually to demand to know more and respond in the present."⁶ Sometimes it is necessary to retrain staff in order to better reach underserved audiences. Retraining presents a very big problem, however. Senior staff should train docents how to deal with situations where questions on race arise, and all docents should be well read and the subject so as to provide detailed and factual information on the matter.

⁵ Max van Balgooy, "Strategies for Interpreting Slavery at Historic Sites," *HistoricSites.WordPress.com*, entry posted on September 15, 2008, <http://historicsites.wordpress.com/2008/09/15/slavery-interpretation-historic-sites-aaslh/> (accessed April 20, 2012).

⁶ Julia Rose, "Interpreting Difficult Knowledge," Technical Leaflet #255, *History News* 66, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 8.

Public historians from all walks of life agree that this kind of interpretation should reflect the fact that slaves were, in fact, human beings and not just property. “Like everything else interpreters talk about at historic sites, slavery too has to be interpreted as a human story....Slavery is a human condition, it is a human force, and it has to be interpreted as it was and how it is—an institution of human beings. It is an institution with a human face—that of every slave, slaver owner, and profiteer of slavery.”⁷ This is important to remember, and every public historian should emphasize this fact. Trying to get a site to a state where all of these issues are properly addressed can take a long time, but it is worth it. When there are certain aspects of the story that are not included, it can taint the perception of the entire site.

Author Donna Ann Harris points out the problems with the sustainability of historic house museums in her book *New Solutions for House Museums: Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America's Historic Houses*. With thousands of historic house museums all across the country, nearly all of them are struggling to survive, including those in Tennessee. She states that most people at the historic houses across the country believe that the problem is essentially financial in nature, but many of the people running these houses do not know how to properly fundraise or otherwise ask for contributions. Another problem “is the capacity of the organization itself. Inexperienced boards are unable to carry forward their preservation and interpretation mission. Tired boards and

⁷ Jacob Dinkelaker, “Interpreting Slavery: Am I not a man and a brother (and a human being)?” *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*, entry posted on October 18, 2011, <http://www.civilwarconnect.com/2011/10/interpreting-slavery-am-i-not-man-and.html> (accessed April 20, 2012).

volunteers burn out.”⁸ Harris also points out that an aging board poses a problem at many sites because many museums have not put the time and effort into finding younger board members to replace the older ones.⁹ If all of the board members are elderly, the museum is not properly representing the community it is trying to reach, either. In any case, it is of utmost importance that the board and the staff have a compatible relationship. A central component of bringing about change in interpretation is full involvement from the board of directors and the staff at any historic site. In an interview conducted in 2012, the curatorial assistant at The Hermitage stated:

I think it’s all about timing. With the Hermitage, it was just the right time with the right group of people, and they were able to really push that forward. Not to say that it happened without any sort of pushback because it happened. I think it’s about timing. Who knows exactly what the reason is when those doors are closed and it’s just the curators, the staff, and the board, what discussions are happening. You know, how do they feel that dealing with these subjects will affect the museum itself, how it will affect their audiences, how closely tied are admissions to how they function. There’s all these different factors.¹⁰

Addressing slavery is of course something that many national institutions and organizations take seriously, and it is something that state sites and communities should take into account as well. The National Park Service, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the American Association of State and Local History, and many other such organizations have taken this issue seriously in recent years. They know how to notice visitor expectations and changes in **the demographics of their visitors**, and this is

⁸ Donna Ann Harris, *New Solutions for House Museums: Ensuring the Long-Term Preservation of America’s Historic Houses* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 11.

⁹ Harris, 12-13.

¹⁰ Ashley Bouknight, Interview by Author, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, August 28, 2012. Interview lightly edited to remove grammatical errors.

something that more sites in Tennessee must learn how to do. According to Susan P. Schreiber, “History is an interpretive construct that continuously changes, reflecting the questions and perspectives of the contemporary culture as it seeks to make the past meaningful to its own world.”¹¹ Making the past meaningful in historic sites means making the historic site relevant to the audiences who use it. This may mean having a more diverse staff, dedicating more time to researching African American history at the site in order to tell the story better, and working with the current staff to ensure that the correct information is portrayed on every tour.¹² In a recent study at the Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park in Kennesaw, Georgia that focused on determining African American attitudes toward the Civil War and the site, focus groups weighed in on some of the issues of interpretation. One focus group participant said, “We need to see people who look like us—Black people—to feel comfortable. They need to be a part of the staff and decision-makers.”¹³ Reaching out to the black community is greatly aided by having black staff members. In all of this, the audience remains the most important factor, and their comfort at the site should be the utmost priority.

National Park Service sites all across the South, including the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site, are trying to incorporate the African American story better and to gauge the visitor’s reaction to the interpretation. The following example is representative of how I conducted research at the three presidential sites in Tennessee. This survey

¹¹ Susan P. Schreiber, “Interpreting Slavery at National Trust Sites: A Case Study Addressing Difficult Topics,” *Cultural Resource Management* 23, no. 5 (2000): 49.

¹² *Ibid.*, 49-52.

¹³ Hermina Glass-Avery, “Assessing African American Attitudes Toward the Civil War,” Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA, 2011: 14.

method focuses on how visitors feel about the interpretation of African American history at any specific site. At Manassas National Battlefield Park, employees conducted a survey of thirty-eight visitors and asked them to comment on the interpretation of slavery at the site. Twenty-three visitors said that the aspect of slavery should be presented in more detail, eight visitors said that the current interpretations of it at the site were sufficient, and seven visitors chose not to answer the question. Some of the visitors who answered the survey commented that slavery is a very important topic to discuss and that it should have a stronger presence at the site while others commented that the focus should stay on the battle and not to mess with such an uncomfortable subject.¹⁴ This is very telling that the majority of respondents thought that more of an emphasis needed to be placed on slavery, but it is also telling in that some visitors were not at ease with the idea of bringing up slavery. Still, it is obvious that the subject needs to be discussed, and this survey at Manassas National Battlefield Park only emphasizes that need. Employees at the site also thought that slavery should have a more prominent interpretation at the site and that the discussions of it should be tailored to the kinds of tours that the site conducts. Overall, the site realized the need to refine its interpretation to better suit the needs of its audience.¹⁵ That is something that all historic sites should be willing to do, and it is something that has been a common theme in the surveys conducted for this project.

¹⁴ Sandra R. Heard, "Presenting Race and Slavery at Historic Sites: Manassas National Battlefield Park," NPS and George Washington University, 2006
http://www.cr.nps.gov/crdi/Manassas_Report_Final.pdf (accessed March 4, 2012), 12-14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12-21.

Presidential sites that have done well with addressing the issue of slavery in their interpretations include Mt. Vernon, the home of George Washington, and Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson. These sites have actually served as examples for the staff at The Hermitage during the restructuring of the interpretation at the site, and they can serve as examples for the Ancestral Home of James K. Polk and the Andrew Johnson National Historic Site as well. From their very beginnings, Mt. Vernon and Monticello served as examples of how to create and interpret a historic house museum, whether in good ways or in bad.¹⁶ While certain aspects of the past, including slavery, were silenced at these sites for many years, both of these sites now actively portray the story of the enslaved people who worked for these men. Monticello has an especially complicated story to tell given Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemmings, an enslaved woman, but it faces it head-on in the interpretation and in special exhibits. People love Mt. Vernon and Monticello, and since these sites tell a very inclusive story, the hundreds of thousands of visitors to these sites every year learn about the complexities of history and of the lives of these presidents. The reactions to their interpretations have been overall very positive based on reports from and about Monticello and Mt. Vernon.¹⁷ Being such popular sites of heritage tourism, these presidential sites on a different level of scrutiny and a different

¹⁶ Patricia West, *Domesticating History: The Political Origins of America's House Museums* (Washington, D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution, 1999), 36-37, 127.

¹⁷ Karen Grigsby Bates, "Life at Jefferson's Monticello, As His Slaves Saw It," *National Public Radio*, <http://www.npr.org/2012/03/11/148305319/life-at-jeffersons-monticello-as-his-slaves-saw-it> (accessed September 27, 2012); Scott Casper, "Rebranding Mount Vernon," *The New York Times*, February 20, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/21/opinion/21casper.html?_r=1& (accessed September 27, 2012); Annie Gowen, "At Mount Vernon, Lives of Washington's Slaves Become Real: Exhibit Includes a Re-creation of Field Hand Cabins," *The Boston Globe*, http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2007/09/23/at_mount_vernon_lives_of_washingtons_slaves_become_real/ (accessed September 27, 2012); Lucia C. Stanton, *Slavery at Monticello*, Charlottesville, VA: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 1996.

level of influence within the museum community and among visitors. That is why it is so important for these presidential sites to tell an inclusive story—they reach many more people than the average historic site.

Public historians from all walks of life agree that this kind of interpretation should reflect the fact that slaves were, in fact, human beings and not just property. “Like everything else interpreters talk about at historic sites, slavery too has to be interpreted as a human story....Slavery is a human condition, it is a human force, and it has to be interpreted as it was and how it is—an institution of human beings. It is an institution with a human face—that of every slave, slaver owner, and profiteer of slavery.”¹⁸ This is important to remember, and every public historian should emphasize this fact. Trying to get a site to a state where all of these issues are properly addressed can take a long time, but it is worth it in order to maintain historical accuracy. When there are certain aspects of the story that are not included, it can taint the perception of the entire site. A good interpretation and meaningful community outreach can boost the reputation and the community importance of a historic site, just as it is currently doing for The Hermitage.

In order to reach African Americans, historic institutions need to embrace their communities, listen to their viewpoints, and work with them to craft more effective interpretations of the African American experience. Putting the time and effort into focusing on why this group of people does not attend museums and how it can be remedied is beneficial for museums in tangible and intangible ways. They know that they

¹⁸ Jacob Dinkelaker, “Interpreting Slavery: Am I not a man and a brother (and a human being)?” *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*, entry posted on October 18, 2011, <http://www.civilwarconnect.com/2011/10/interpreting-slavery-am-i-not-man-and.html> (accessed April 20, 2012).

can reach people who need to be represented properly. Historic institutions need to focus on being culturally relevant and on creating a welcoming presence for all minority groups.¹⁹ This is something that affects all of the historic sites in Tennessee that have been discussed in this work. Properly incorporating the African American story is something that they should all take seriously, and some of them are well on their way to doing that while others are far behind.

Relationships with the community are absolutely necessary to bringing in a more diverse audience.. If historic institutions can properly execute their interpretation and create a dialogue between the white community and the black community, they can aid in developing better racial understanding. According to David Goldfield, cases can be made that “race relations in the South are steadily improving” or that “the advances of the 1960s are slowly eroding under political and economic pressures.”²⁰

The demographics of museum audiences have been changing throughout the country and in the South for decades. “The U.S. population is shifting rapidly and within four decades, the group that has historically constituted the core audience for museums—non-Hispanic whites—will be a minority of the population.”²¹ This is an important reason why it is so important to reach out to minority groups and help them to feel included and welcome at historic sites in Tennessee. As of right now, African Americans make up a

¹⁹ Cecilia Garibay, “Responsive and Accessible: How Museums are Using Research to Better Engage Diverse Cultural Communities,” *Association of Science Technology Centers Dimensions* (January/February 2011) <http://www.astc.org/blog/2011/02/28/responsive-and-accessible-how-museums-are-using-research-to-better-engage-diverse-cultural-communities/> (accessed April 4, 2012).

²⁰ Goldfield, *Still Fighting*, 289.

²¹ Betty Farrell and Maria Medvedeva, *Demographic Transformation and the Future of Museums* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 2010), 5.

very small percentage of the museum-going population.²² This fact is due to many various factors, but museums need to recognize that their future existence depends on being able to reach audiences beyond that of middle and upper class whites. A 1993 study by John H. Falk indicated that African Americans have traditionally underutilized museums because many people within the black community see them as racist institutions. However, the African Americans surveyed demonstrated a general interest to learn about their heritage no matter their age, sex, education level, or socioeconomic status. The study concluded that four factors emerged as the most important in influencing museum going by African Americans. “Three of these operated negatively to reduce museum visitation among African Americans: socio-economic variables, racism (real and perceived) and, most importantly, the museum-going habit (past and present). The fourth variable, church-going, was a positive factor which appeared to increase utilization.”²³ Museums thus need to focus on helping African Americans learn about their heritage and on doing away with the connotation that museums are racist if they want to remain viable and have higher visitor rates in the future.

There are several difficulties that arise in trying to tell a more complete story that includes African Americans. These include resistance from staff, research roadblocks, perceived alienation of the established audience, board involvement, and financial problems. It is worth it, and it is necessary to the sustainability of the historic house, to work past these obstacles and create a more complete and inclusive interpretation. They

²² Ibid., 12.

²³ John H. Falk, “Leisure Decisions Influencing African-American Use of Museums,” *Visitor Behavior* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1993) 11-12.

must find ways to bring in more resources and more visitors, or they must find a creative way to survive. They should take a lesson from John Cotton Dana, who believed in the importance of museums being an asset to the community. A museum has to be respected and effective at teaching about the past in order for it to be influential according to him. In addition, a museum is to act as a school, and as a school, it has to hold academic research and study high on its list of priorities while encouraging others to take part in the academic pursuit of history as well. Its purpose has to be evident to all who worked and visited there.²⁴ The house museum has a specific and important role in the museum community, and the various house museums across the country have a specific role in their individual communities. There are so many of them because they can tell a story in a relatable way because they are places of life and living. They can demonstrate history in a way that no other museum can.²⁵

²⁴ John Cotton Dana, *A Plan for a New Museum: The Kind of Museum it Will Profit a City to Maintain* (Woodstock, VT: The Elm Tree Press, 1920), 44-57.

²⁵ Jessica Foy Donnelly, *Interpreting Historic House Museums* (New York and Oxford: 2002), 3-5.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A:
IRB APPROVAL LETTER



July 2, 2012

Lauren Baud
Department of History
lab5e@mtmail.mtsu.edu , Brenden.Martin@mtsu.edu

Protocol Title: "Improving the Interpretation of Slavery at Tennessee's Presidential Sites"

Protocol
Number:
12-343

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The MTSU Institutional Review Board, or a representative of the IRB, has reviewed the research proposal identified above. The MTSU IRB or its representative has determined that the study poses minimal risk to participants and qualifies for an expedited review under the 45 CFR 46.110 Category 7.

Approval is granted for one (1) year from the date of this letter for 1,000 participants.

According to MTSU Policy, a researcher is defined as anyone who works with data or has contact with participants. Anyone meeting this definition needs to be listed on the protocol and needs to provide a certificate of training to the Office of Compliance. **If you add researchers to an approved project, please forward an updated list of researchers and their certificates of training to the Office of Compliance (c/o Emily Born, Box 134) before they begin to work on the project.** Any change to the protocol must be submitted to the IRB before implementing this change.

Please note that any unanticipated harms to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918.

You will need to submit an end-of-project form to the Office of Compliance upon completion of your research located on the IRB website. Complete research means that you have finished collecting and analyzing data. **Should you not finish your research within the one (1) year period, you must submit a Progress Report and request a continuation prior to the expiration date.** Please allow time for review and requested revisions. Your study expires **July 2, 2013**.

Also, all research materials must be retained by the PI or faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) for at least three (3) years after study completion. Should you have any questions or need additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Emily Born".

Emily Born
Research Compliance Officer
Middle Tennessee State University

APPENDIX B:
SAMPLE SURVEY FOR STAFF

Survey Template--Staff
(ALL ANSWERS WILL REMAIN ANONYMOUS)

SEX: _____ RACE: _____ AGE: _____

1. How long have you worked at _____?
2. Do you have a college and/or graduate degree? If so, in what subject?
3. Are you satisfied with how this site interprets race and slavery?
4. Do you think the interpretation at this site lacks in any way?
5. If you could give any advice on how to improve the tour and its interpretation of slavery, what would it be?
6. If you have any other comments, please write them here:

APPENDIX C:

SAMPLE SURVEY FOR VISITORS

Survey Template--Visitors
(ALL ANSWERS WILL REMAIN ANONYMOUS)

SEX: _____ RACE: _____ AGE: _____

1. What brought you to _____ today?
2. Did you come by yourself or with a group today?
3. Was your tour guide informative?
4. Were you satisfied with your tour?
5. What was your favorite part of the tour?
6. What was your least favorite part of the tour?
7. Did you like/dislike how slavery was interpreted here? Why or why not?
8. If you could give any advice on how to improve the tour and its interpretation of slavery, what would it be?
9. If you have any other comments, please write them here:

APPENDIX D:
INFORMED CONSENT DISCLAIMER

This oral history/focus group/survey is for my personal thesis research on how Tennessee's three presidential sites interpret slavery. This research will help demonstrate how these sites do or do not interpret race and slavery well, and my final product will help to bring about change at sites that still struggle with this part of history. Your participation will hopefully lead to a more inclusive interpretation at these sites and will help in creating greater understanding in the historical community. This is completely optional, and your survey will remain anonymous. (Oral histories will be in the public domain with your consent, but I will not use your name in my final product if that is your wish.) If this is uncomfortable for you in any way, you are not obligated to participate. If you choose to participate and later change your mind, you are free to renege on your agreement to take part in the project research.

APPENDIX E:
SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- How often do you visit the Hermitage/Polk Home/Andrew Johnson site/other plantation museums?
- If it is not often, why?
- If it is often, why?
- How does it make you feel when the African American story and the story of slavery specifically are left out at such sites?
- How do you think the Hermitage/Polk Home/Andrew Johnson site do with the African American story at their sites?
- How important is it to you to see the story of African Americans told at historic sites?
- Why do you think the African American story gets left out?
- Do you think more African Americans would attend museums if they felt their story was just as important there as the white story? Would you?
- What do you think would be the best way to go about incorporating the African American story more fully at the presidential sites and other sites?

APPENDIX F:

PUBLIC DOMAIN ORAL HISTORY RELEASE

I hereby agree to donate this recording, video, transcript, and photograph, to the public domain. The materials may become part of a public archive. Unless otherwise specified below, I place no restrictions on non-commercial access to and use of the recording, transcript, photograph, videotape, or related material.

I understand that the contents of the recording/transcript may be quoted or excerpted and may be published as part of a scholarly paper, used in media productions, exhibitions, or other nonprofit public productions. The transcript and recording may also be published on the web. The photographs, artifacts, or other material may also be reproduced in educational and other nonprofit public programs. I give my permission and release all copyright so that these materials may be used for educational purposes.

I shall retain the complete and unrestricted right to reproduce, publish, broadcast, transmit, perform or adapt the interview myself.

Interviewee/Donor

Date

Interviewee/Donor

Date

Interviewer

Date